THE SKY DETECTIVES

AMBROSE NEWCOMB

Dick

With all my love
an Christmas!

Pat

AVIATION

THE SKY DETECTIVES

OR

How Jack Ralston Got His Man

BY

AMBROSE NEWCOMB

Author of "Eagles of the Sky," etc., etc.

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THE SKY DETECTIVES

CHAPTER I

READY FOR THE TAKE-OFF

It was a day in the late Fall when Jack Ralston, accompanied by his best pal, Gabe Perkiser, known simply as "Perk" by all his friends, found themselves climbing out of a hired taxi that had halted on the border of Candler Flying Field just a short distance out of Atlanta, Georgia.

"Huh! reg'lar mob out here today, seems like," observed Perk, as he took note of the triple line of cars parked around the field, with its numerous up-to-date hangars, and with ships coming and going every few minutes.

"Yes, you see Perk, it happens to be a big day at stunt flying, with fat prizes for the winners. All the better for us, I'd say, since our take-off will hardly make a ripple in the pond, with all this confusion going on."

"Sure thing, my boy," continued Perk, with one of his humorous grins that betokened a good-

natured chap; "and privacy's just what we crave. I guess now that might be the mail comin' from down East an' New York?"

"A rotten guess then, Perk," chortled the other; "Eastern mail boat was due here at six-ten this morning; the Pitcairn Aviation concern handle that route, as well as the run between Atlanta and Miami down in Florida; and I'm telling you for a fact the boys holding the stick with *that* corporation are nearly always on time to the dot, come storm, come fog as thick as pea-soup. The schedule I glimpsed at the Atlanta post office gave the time of the East Coast ship as seven-thirty P. M.; that from New Orleans at six-thirty P. M.; and the one from Chicago about the same time. So you see it couldn't be a mail crate dropping down right now, unless they'd had to make a forced landing, and lost time in making repairs."

"Yeah, come to think of it I sure did hear a bus passin' over just at peep o' day," admitted Perk. "Let's have a look-in while we're here, and see what a bag o' tricks these stunt flyers are holdin' up their sleeves, so's to give this crowd a row o' thrills."

"Suits me, Perk; no great hurry about our jumping off, so long as we pull the gun before dark sets in."

"Shucks! little difference it makes on a patch

as well lighted as this Candler Field o' your home city, old boy; and with a flashlight beacon set every ten miles all the way down to Orleans, to keep us on our course. Look at that guy fairly burning the air like hot cakes—he must be tryin' to beat the speed record, I guess, Jack."

"Hardly a day comes without some record going by the board," remarked Jack, who had a reputation as a safe and sane pilot, although on occasion he had been known to put through some tricks so death-defying as to make the hearts of the spectators seem to jump up in their throats with the thrill.

Perk was quite correct when he stated that Atlanta was the home city of his close friend and chum; although Jack's family had moved away years back, and become fruit raisers in far-off California. Still, having spent some years in the Georgia capital Jack always liked to drop in and renew a limited number of old friendships when opportunity offered.

Jack Ralston had begun his aviation work starting at the lowest round, that of a Gypsy pilot, flying an ancient boat at County Fairs and Harvest Home gatherings; doing aerial stunts, and "bailing out" by means of a parachute while another pilot ran the ship; also taking up air minded "sand-bags" as passengers at so much each person.

From this modest beginning he had finally accepted a position with an aircraft corporation having contracts with the Post Office Department at Washington for carrying the mails, and later on express matter as well; and last of all working for Uncle Sam through joining the Secret Service corps of skillful detectives, whose activities covered every part of the Nation, and even to adjacent countries as well.

When the Government wearied of the bold doings of one "Slippery Slim" Garrabrant, and decided to "clip the wings" of that audacious freebooter and bogus-money crook, it was only natural they should pick Jack for this service. The reasons for doing so were many, but what counted most was Jack's well known cleverness as an all-round air pilot; for it happened that the slick rogue who had been giving the revenue men such a wild-goose chase, with his thumb held up to his nose, so to speak, was himself a remarkable master of the air lanes, he having been an ace as a flying pilot over with the army on the Argonne front in France.

Since as a rule this troublesome offender carried on his bold enterprises by means of a handy plane—frequently with a single assistant, who helped handle both ship and cargo—the man thus selected to put a crimp in his activities was likewise given full permission to engage a helper

from the same arm of the Government forces, one who must of course know something about the handling of a plane, so that in case of necessity he could serve as co-pilot.

Jack lost no time in picking Gabe Perkiser, otherwise known simply as "Perk"—a man who had supped with adventure since he was "knee high to a duck"—a half Yankee—half Canuck, drifting into the army, and serving with the sausage observation balloon corps over in France; from which patriotic occupation he later on became a champion light-weight boxer. Leaving the ring while as yet undefeated he served for several years with the Canadian Mounted Police. Here his smartness in usually fetching back his man, no matter what the difficulties that had to be surmounted, attracted the attention of a gentleman connected with Uncle Sam's Secret Service, just then moose hunting over the northern border, who finally influenced Perk to join up with his force.

Jack and the other had met under peculiar conditions when both were tracking a bunch of check raisers floating across the country and leaving a wide swath of victims in their path. They had become more than friends, although meeting but seldom; then, when the opportunity came for Jack to call upon Perk to join him in the new job that had been turned over to his

charge, the latter had responded with alacrity.

So here they were, on the threshold of an affair that promised to engage their united talents in running down the leader of the most troublesome gang of counterfeit currency makers known to the Government agents in the last ten years.

Every clue possessed at Headquarters had been turned over to Jack at the time he was given authority to carry on as the situation demanded; although this information was a bit limited, and much was left to the shrewdness of the two trail hounds themselves.

There was no hurry at all, and Jack had always been one of those cautious workers who meant to provide for all sorts of emergencies. Only too well did he know how many a splendid undertaking went on the rocks from lack of foreseeing the next move on the part of the astute criminals whose apprehension meant so much to the Government, as well as the folks they were victimizing.

But by now he had decided everything was arranged so far as human means would permit, and that it was high time they started on their long chase. Their boat, a Stinson Detroiter, a monoplane with a Wright Whirlwind motor, and reckoned to be an unusually swift craft, was already loaded, and ready for immediate de-

parture. It had been stored in one of the big hangars connected with the Candler Flying Field but could be taxied into position when Jack felt ready to skip off.

Their flying togs were also contained in a locker in the same hangar, and could be donned in a jiffy, even to the 'chute harness that was so familiar to Jack, and a constant reminder of early experiences when he was accustomed to carry out his daily program of "quitting the ship" with as much *sang froid* as though the jump into space from a five thousand foot ceiling were absolutely next to nothing.

But plainly Perk was becoming a bit restless, as though eager to be on his way; which fact doubtless influenced Jack to eventually give the word that took them to their hangar. Here they commenced preparing for a night flight that was expected to land them in New Orleans, where Jack was to interview a certain representative of the Government service, from whom he anticipated receiving a few valuable tips that would give them something tangible and serve as a beginning of their arduous chase.

While they were thus engaged someone hailed them with a boisterous greeting, at which Perk grinned, and made a suitable reply.

"Hey, Scotty, this your night off, is it—got in from your route okay, and stepped out to see

the boys cut a few figger-eights in the sky—just can't keep away from the game, even when you got a lay-off? What's new, old hoss?"

"They told me at the house you expected to step off tonight, boys—is that a fact, or did they slip an easy one over me, I want to know?" demanded the other, who was apparently a mail pilot friend of theirs—in fact, having the adjoining room at the small hotel where they were stopping.

"Yes," Jack told him, secretive as usual, "we're going further, and boosting the Stinson-Detroiter ship by showing what it has to set it above most other boats. Plans not fully arranged as yet, but we're on our way; so it's good-bye, and good luck to you, Scotty."

"How about that news, Scotty?" the insistent Perk went on to demand, being by nature one of those stubborn chaps who can never be happy until they get what they are after, no matter how trivial it may seem.

The air mail pilot scratched his head, and then with a grin answered Perk's question.

"Nothing much along the line of aviation; but something queer happened to me—say, did you boys sleep at home last night while I was on the road?"

"We sure did," Perk told him, and then added: "What makes you ask that, old hoss?"

"Didn't hear any sort of racket in my den did you, fellows?" continued the other; at which Perk, after exchanging a look of bewilderment with his pal, hastened to answer.

"Not a thing, Scotty; but then you know I sleep like a log; and it'd have to be a thunderclap to wake me up; what's been going on?"

"You got me guessing, Perk," said the other, with a look of disgust; "only when I got in this morning I found my room looking like a hurricane had struck it, my things tossed out of drawers, my trunk broken open, and say, you never saw such a dirty mess. Course I asked the boss what it meant; but he was as much surprised as I was—talked with every servant from the cook down to Mary the chamber maid; but nobody could tell a darned thing about it."

Again Jack and Perk exchanged a swift glance, as though the same idea had struck both of them. Scotty did not appear to notice this, being too worked up with the mystery that had so suddenly gripped his fortunes.

"Did you lose anything worth while, Scotty?" Jack asked, in a voice that suggested sympathy; but to his surprise the other shook his head in the negative, and even grinned as he lifted his heavy eyebrows to say:

"That's the funny part of it, boys; whoever the sneak thief was, he didn't even dent me a

little bit—so far as I c'n see not a blessed thing is missing—fact is, I'm even better off than before he paid that queer visit, 'cause he left this old pocketbook mixed up with my traps; and it ain't mine for a fact, though I'm meaning to spend the little wad of dough it holds. Like manna coming down to the children of Israel in the Wilderness, wouldn't you say, boys?"

"Lucky old hoss you are, Scotty," remarked Perk, enviously; while Jack nodded his head as though to echo the sentiment.

CHAPTER II

THE LUCK OF SCOTTY

"Happen to have that pocketbook along with you, Scotty?" asked Jack, in a matter of fact tone; just as though he might be possessed of ordinary curiosity concerning so amazing a visit; since never before had he heard of a night prowler leaving his own money behind him, when his intention had been to rob his victim.

"Sure thing, Jack," promptly replied the air mail pilot; "here, take a squint at my Christmas present, dropped in by old Santa Claus a bit before the reg'lar holiday season," and with a laugh he chucked the object in question into the hand of the other.

"Old, just as you remarked, Scotty," observed Jack, "and used a long time. It must have slipped out of his pocket when he worked your stuff over to mix it up like the devil."

"Open it up and see what the blessed chump left me in place of his card," the other continued, looking exceedingly proud over his lucky find.

Jack did that with alacrity; in fact it

was what he intended doing, for reasons of his own; something more than curiosity influencing him, it would appear.

"Gee whiz! a neat little bunch of the needful, I'd say, Scotty, old hoss!" burst out the envious Perk, his eyes fixed full upon the contents of the much worn pocketbook, which Jack was holding in his hand and apparently interested in counting, for there were a number of bank notes for various amounts, and among them just three five-dollar bills, seemingly quite fresh, though a bit soiled, as though they had been in circulation.

"Nineteen smackers in all," announced Perk, showing that he had also been keeping tabs on the count. "Well, wouldn't that knock you cold though? Huh? that same caller must've been looking for *me,* and just missed connections by striking the next door. Well, here's wishing you the same old luck every time a sneak thief pays you a visit, Scotty boy."

Jack on his part was feeling of the three five-dollar bills, and holding them up to the light from the western sun that managed to come into the hangar by way of the open doors.

"What ails you, Jack?" demanded the recipient of Fortune's smiles, as he noticed these strange actions on the part of his new friend.

"Nothing much," he was told, "only I'm going

to give you a bit of advice, partner, if you don't mind."

"Go to it, boy; always willing to take it when it seems sound!" snapped the mail carrier, briskly enough, still more than curious.

"If you're wise, Scotty," went on Jack, smilingly, "you'll not try to pass any one of these five-dollar bills until you've asked the opinion of some bank teller — it might get you into trouble."

"Zowie! what's that you're saying, Jack— don't tell me they're off-color bills, counterfeits in fact. Wouldn't that be a rotten deal to hand out, and me figgering how I'd spend them? Is *that* what you mean?"

"I reckon it's so, Scotty, much as I hate to knock your good luck," Jack told him, with a shake of his head. "I happened to have a little experience in a small bank some years ago and they did say I showed signs of being a clever detector of bad money. That's a clever job all right; but I'm afraid it won't stand the wash worth a cent. Go slow, and don't count your chickens before they're hatched. Also I'd advise you not to go around telling about your windfall until you've shown this stuff to some friendly bank official, whose advice you'd be willing to take. If he says it's good stuff why forget what I'm saying, and go the limit. But we'd better

be finishing our own job, Perk, and get off on our jump."

Scotty hung around for a short time, looking puzzled, as though he hardly knew how much to believe. What Jack had said in his friendly fashion had doubtless cast quite a damper on certain bright dreams in which he had been indulging. However, he finally decided to take himself off, evidently eager to know whether the laugh was on him or not, for he called out:

"Goodbye, Jack, Perk; and be sure to look me up when next you drop in at Candler Field Airport; like as not I'll still be on my old job here, unless they decide to transfer me somewhere else. And say, Jack, I'm meaning to take your advice, and get an opinion on this here stuff 'fore I try to pass it out on any old duffer. So-long boys and luck!"

When the two comrades, adventure bound, found themselves alone they looked at each other in silence for almost a full minute, when a grin started to travel over Perk's well bronzed face.

"Say, wouldn't it jar you though, to have such luck knock at your door, and then give you a sly kick?" he demanded of his companion.

"To tell the honest truth, Perk, I'm not thinking about Scotty and his queer windfall; it's our own great good luck that's making me sus-

pect we're bound to carry this job through with flying colors."

"Eh? now what d'ye mean by saying that?" asked the other hastily.

"Right in the beginning, Perk, we seem to have stumbled on a nice little plum in the shape of a clue—flung directly at our heads, you might say in the bargain."

"Glory be! do you mean to tell me those bogus notes were off the same plates we've been hearing so much about lately that I've been dreamin' I was tied hand an' foot, an' poked under a dozen bales of them?"

"Just that, as sure as you live, partner," said Jack, composedly; but if he could take it so coolly, not so his right bower who showed signs of extreme excitement and satisfaction, for he thrust out his hand, that had so often been an object of vast respect on the part of some welter weight boxer, and insisted that Jack accept a gentle shake.

"We're sure Fortune's favorites," Perk was saying, striking an attitude as he thus proudly spoke; "an' with such luck hoverin' over our heads I vow all the Lower Regions with its devils can't prevail against us. But see here, old hoss, there's more than chance in this break o' the party who broke through Scotty's door, and panned all his traps—I guess now he must have

missed a cylinder, an' jest passed us by in a ground loop."

Jack was accustomed to the other's quaint way of expressing himself, for he lost no time in adding:

"About that way, I take it, Perk. And if what we suspect turns out to be true, it stands to reason there's some sort of big combine back of it all."

"With this same Slippery Slim Garrabrant pulling the wires for the whole bunch, is that what you mean, Jack?" demanded the other flyer quickly; for when once set on the right track Perk's mind could travel speedily enough.

"It's certainly his brain that's built up this wide flim-flam trade in the make believe green stuff that's been fooling a whole lot of bank tellers, it's so near the genuine article. To smash the combine we've got to check up on Slim; after he's caged the entire arrangement's bound to fall through."

"I get you, partner; and them's my sentiments every time," admitted the eager Perk. "And here, when we're starting out to pull off our fresh stunt, I'm wishing all the luck that's going to our little game. Meaning to give her a last checking over, eh, Jack?"

"It's a habit of mine, as you know, Perk; and you might amuse yourself stowing the cargo

we've taken aboard, so's to let us have room for our feet when we take off. From the looks of the junk you picked up anybody'd reckon we planned to go into camp for a week or two."

"Well, mebbe that's what'll happen to us before we strike pay dirt in this ticklish job," asserted Perk, stoutly. "You know we figgered things out, and made up our minds this same slick article of a Slim might have his hangout over the line in Old Mexico, where he prints his bad bills, and then comes across the line with a big bunch in his ship, so's to scatter the stuff around to his agents in Texas and Arizona, or it might be all through Southern California. If that guess turns out to be a bullseye we might be away off the line of travel for days at a stretch, and a grub stake'd turn the trick okay, I'm thinking, boss."

Jack made no reply, for he was already busily engaged in looking over his crate. This was, as he had mentioned, an old habit, contracted in the early days of his career as an aviator of sorts; and most likely such extreme caution had saved his life more than once.

As he too worked close by, Perk was thinking more or less about something that had caught his ever watchful eye just before they entered the hangar to make these last preparations for their southern flight. As usual he was unable

to keep his speculations entirely to himself, since he always liked to compare notes, and find out whether his companion's views coincided with his own.

"Say, Jack, did you happen to notice that Ryan ship they'd just taken out of the shed before ours?" he demanded, while still lifting packages of various supplies, and stowing them away in a shipshape fashion; so they would not be likely to shift, and thus imperil the safety of himself and comrade, should they chance to encounter rough weather later on.

"Not particularly," came the answer. "I was too busy over my own affairs to bother with anything that didn't concern me in the least. What of it, Perk?"

"Nothing much, old hoss, only it was a next to new bus, and hadn't been flown more'n a few thousand air miles, I'd guess. Couple of fellers seemed to be the crew, one of 'em lookin' like he might be a pilot; and the other a chap that was out to have a jolly good time sportin' for sport. I saw him handlin' some sort of gun, which made me guess he was down South for the shootin' season — mebbe after bear in the Louisiana canebrakes."

Jack laughed as if amused, for he had noted the way in which the other made this stab at

what might be the designs of the unknown parties.

"Feel a bit envious I take it, Perk," he observed, laconically. "Always did yearn for the day to come when you'd have a ship of your own, and could spend all your spare time jumping about the country, enjoying yourself with rod and gun. Cheer up, old sport, you may live to see that day yet, if things break right for us in a few big games like this one we're running down."

"Thanks for your good luck wishes, Jack," the other was saying; "I c'n just picture the bully times that pair'll like enough have sitting by their camp-fire, living on game they've knocked over, and not caring a darn whether school keeps or not. Oh! well, if I live long enough mebbe I may have a whiff of that kind of life before I kick off for keeps; they say everything comes to the man who waits, and that's me. There, that finishes my job, with everything stowed away as slick as you please. When you're ready, Jack, we'll be on our way."

CHAPTER III

HEADED SOUTH

Apparently Jack had completed his task about the same time, for he was adjusting his 'chute harness, without which he seldom made a long distance flight. This was only second nature to him, because of the long experience he had had in barnstorming, and doing stunts for a living in years gone by.

This accomplished, he stepped outside the hangar, and beckoned to a couple of ground workers who chanced to be close by, possibly in anticipation of their services being required, with a tip in prospect.

Between them the ship was moved to the open, and after that it would be a simple thing for Jack to taxi across the strip of ground adjoining the big Pitcairn hangar, so as to face such wind as was stirring.

With what Perk had said concerning the new Ryan monoplane and its crew still fresh in his mind, Jack did give a brief glance in that quarter. He could only see that both men were fully equipped with dungarees, helmets, and even

chutes fastened to their backs; which combination was an effectual disguise, since their best friends might have failed to recognize either of them offhand.

The one who was garbed in what seemed to be fresh clean overalls, and who must be the employer, seemed to feel a mild interest in their movements, for he was looking that way through his goggles, that had been pulled down as if in preparation for some species of flight. The other was busying himself adjusting something, and from his greasy dungarees it was evident he must be the working pilot of the Ryan craft.

With all the bustle that was going on covering the stunt flying and speed races, Jack did not bother taking a second look; he failed to have the same interest in the possible sporting excursion of the unknown pair that had gripped Perk and hence failed to let the matter occupy any more of his limited time.

They were soon both settled down in their respective places in the double cockpit of the ship, Jack of course occupying the front seat, since he had been placed in command, with the other acting as co-pilot and observer.

It was a very decent crate taken in all, that had been secured for their work on this special occasion, for Uncle Sam is never stingy in supplying his agents of the Secret Service with

whatever they need, from means for swift travel to the customary "grub" necessary to their upkeep when "on the road." These air detectives in whom we are particularly interested just now, as a rule were angling for big fish, and it was absolutely necessary they should be given a free hand when making their demands for proper backing.

"Well, it's goodbye to Candler Field for us right now," remarked Perk, as he shot a general look around, being more or less interested in the exciting events being pulled off in the air circus. "Playtime's past, and now we've just got to put in our best licks along the line of business. Huh! seems like them two guys are meaning to pull out right on our heels, from the lively way that greasy lad is jumping around—keeps an eye on us in the bargain, as if it mattered a lick whether we did get going before he was ready to follow suit. Some folks never do like anybody to show 'em their dust, even when it don't matter a pinch."

Just then Jack waved his hand toward the two hostlers whom he had generously tipped, and pulled the gun in his accustomed careful fashion; after which they started along the level field for the takeoff, there being small necessity for a runway on such a generous fairway.

Faster and faster they flew along the ground,

and then with their wheels parting contact with the earth up they started at an easy incline. The roar of the motor already drowned most of the clamor from the surging crowd, while the racket of the whizzing propeller added to the chorus so joyous to the ears of all real air pilots, since nothing pleases them more than to feel they are masters of a ship that is in "apple-pie" condition for battling whatever lies ahead, be it storm, fog or whatnot.

Somehow Perk was twisting his head around as if curious to ascertain whether that Ryan crate had succeeded in imitating their example, and was already making the preliminary dash across the field — which luckily enough had chanced to be fairly clear of maneuvering planes, either descending, taking off, or being taxied into position for the next stunt on the program.

The afternoon was getting well along by this time, and already the first dim shadows of approaching night were to be seen slipping out from certain patches of pine trees ahead. But the higher they climbed, now that a start had been accomplished, the lighter it would become, what with a lower horizon, and the sun still hanging in plain sight.

Once free from any possibility of any contact with the wheeling and ducking planes—some of

which were doing the barrel roll, and others making successive somersaults, with the daring pilots proceeding while in an inverted position—Jack could start spiraling, and climbing.

Rapidly was Candler Field fading from view behind them since Jack had swung toward the south, as if to lay his course directly for New Orleans. Perk seemed to find a subtle attraction back where they had just come from, since he was again turning his head with nothing else to do save gratify his innocent curiosity.

"Huh! 'pears like they might be meaning to strike for the Louisiana canebrake country, and black bear diggings, just like I said," he was telling himself, with a chuckle of amusement over his shrewd guess. "And say, that little Ryan crate's no slouch 'bout making speed, I'd mention. Come along you sportin' crowd—plenty of room in the ceiling overhead, an' nixey a chance to bring about a collision. Take your choice, and cut out for all you're worth, boys. If you get there before we do, just tell 'em we're acomin' too."

So Perk continued to amuse himself in watching the antics of the rival ship, and indulging in all kinds of wild speculations as to what the real object of those two sporty looking occupants might prove to be.

Evidently thus far not the slightest suspicion had entered his mind that the taking to the air of the shining Ryan boat had the first thing to do with their own skipping out, and heading toward the Crescent City.

"Like as not when it gets real dark after a bit," Perk continued to say, being addicted to talking to himself more or less, "we'll soon lose her, and have the field all to ourselves. Only moving thing I c'n sight back there, 'cept them circlin' buzzards huntin' for a carrion supper. Guess everything's going along first class and we're in for a comfortable night run down over the corn and sugarcane country. This is the life for little Perk, you hear me saying, everybody—it's got the boxin' game, and even that outdoor life up with the Mounties in Canada, beat to a frazzle."

So Perk busied himself with his duties for some time, and presently became aware of the fact that evening was actually at hand; for the sun had dropped out of sight over in the far west, and looking down he found it absolutely impossible to distinguish what lay beneath them some two thousand feet more or less earthward —there might be forests, farms, hills or swales following each other in rapid succession; but all masked by the sable curtains of night. When the moon rose later on, its light would not afford

them any opportunity for marking any peculiarities of the ground down there, since it must simply present the appearance of a swiftly moving panorama.

Perk, moved once more by his old curiosity concerning the ship that had started off immediately after their own jump, again twisted his head so as to take another backward look.

"Hanged if she ain't keeping on our tail right along," he told himself, as if a bit surprised, though not in the least troubled, since there could be no possible connection between this Ryan monoplane and their own old bus, bent on reeling off so many miles per hour, and aiming to make the airport at New Orleans by early dawn or before, according to how the weather treated them, and the speed Jack could coax from his aerial steed.

Further inspection convinced Perk that the rival ship was neither gaining nor losing as the two sped along their way; a fact that began to make him "sit up and take notice," and then express himself confidentially:

"By jinks! it looks to me like that clever little Ryan bus could make circles around our tub 'less Jack c'n squeeze a lot more snap from our Whirlwind motor. Now what game c'n that pair of sports be playin' right now, I want to know—must be they're so used to bettin' on

anything an' everything they're meanin' to keep right on our tail all night long, just to make us hump along, and get the laugh on us poor guys."

CHAPTER IV

THE GRIM PURSUER

As the minutes crept along Perk's uneasiness commenced to make itself more manifest, finally reaching such a condition that he felt it would ease his mind if only he could get the opinion of his companion on the subject.

To do this it would be necessary that they should make use of the head earphones that had been taken along for this particular purpose. Accordingly he quickly adjusted his own, and then proceeded to advise Jack as to what he wished to do. Since these useful adjuncts of the pilot's outfit were so arranged that they could be slipped on and off with little loss of time, it was an easy matter for Perk to apply them, after which he went on to speak.

"Jack, seems like that pesky little Ryan insect's been tailing us right along, though mebbe now you didn't notice it."

"I know it, Perk—fact is I proved that fact to my own satisfaction, for twice now I've changed our course, once into the west, and

again heading into the southwest, even if it didn't catch your attention."

"You did that same; and say, what happened, Jack?"

"Not a blessed thing," came the immediate answer.

"They still hung on our tail, do you mean, old hoss?"

"Seems like they did—queer how two pilots, strangers both, would take a notion to change their course, not once but twice running," commented Jack in his non-committal fashion that always had Perk guessing.

"Strikes me as something more than a happy chance," asserted Perk, beginning to throw off that comfortable feeling with which he had wrapped himself as he contemplated a steady going night run, with never a reason for anything gripping them by way of excitement; "ev'ry little movement of that Ryan two-seater's got a meanin' of its own. Now what ails the ducks I want to know—how c'n our movements have a mite to do with what they're planning to carry out—got any idea along them lines, old hoss?"

"Nothing definite as yet," answered Jack; "I was starting to figure it out just when you barged in, and opened this talk fest up with your question."

"Jack, come to think of it, what did you make out of that stiff yarn Scotty put over on us a while ago?"

"It was raw stuff for a fact; but I don't question anything he told us, remember, Perk."

"Whoever his mysterious visitor was he must have been hunting for something, that's dead sure!" declared Perk.

"Yes."

"Something he didn't find, either," continued Jack's assistant pilot.

"Scotty was ready to swear to that fact, and he ought to know." Jack countered by saying:

"But see here, old hoss, you've got some sorter idea what the game might abeen, haven't you for a fact?"

"I reckon I know why the sneak thief failed to carry away the thing he was looking for, if that's what you mean, Perk."

"As what, boss—I'm all worked up wantin' to know."

"Perhaps the reason might have been because the object of his search happened at that very time to be safe and snug in the inside pocket of this same coat I'm wearing under my overalls."

At hearing this startling announcement Perk gave a quick look into his pal's face, there being

just enough light remaining in the western sky to allow this searching glance.

"Glory be! now I'm beginning to get somewhere, and ready to quit this gropin' around, like a man in a London fog—that letter you had this very morning from Headquarters — somehow 'r other some of the gang had wind of your gettin' it, and they guessed it'd be kept safe under lock and key in your room at the hotel; and then they got balled up about the number on the door, so they broke into the wrong room. Jack, am I on the right track?"

"Seems that's so, according to my notion, Perk; unless I miss my guess that's the way things stand."

A disgusted grunt from Perk told that he did not feel very happy over certain facts in the case.

"Gosh-a-mighty!" he burst out, explosively, "if that's right, then the tricky crowd know you'n me are on this case—that even right now we're starting out to pluck their tail feathers, and fetch that master-crook to the bar!"

"Oh! I expected that would happen," said Jack, indifferently. "Having been told by several of the best men in the service that Slim was the smartest all-round dopester known in all the land, I anticipated that he'd have means for finding out that fact long ago—that there might be a leak around Headquarters; for spies can

worm in almost anywhere, given an opportunity, and the backing of a big bunch of jack."

"Yet that fact don't seem to rattle you worth a red cent, old hoss," continued the puzzled Perk, who ofttimes found the actions of nis cool partner a mystery he could not solve, because of his own more impetuous ways.

"I hope not," was all Jack said in reply.

"Thunder and lightning!" ejaculated the co-pilot, as if an illuminating idea had suddenly flashed through his brain — "that Ryan bus, Jack!"

"Well, what of it?" demanded the one at the stick.

"What if that sporty guy I told you about should turn out to be the critter who broke into Scotty's room, and made it a complete wreck?"

"It could happen that way, Perk; seems like you're working on a warm scent right now. Pity we didn't get a good look at the gentleman before he hid his face behind that helmet and goggles; then at least we'd know him if ever we happened to run across his trail."

The other was almost frothing at the mouth through disgust and anger combined; but he managed to say, with a select few hard words interlarded as a vent to his outraged feelings:

"Give me half a chance and I'll mark him so there's be no difficulty in locating the sneak when

we meet him again — I'd put a bit of lead through his arm that'd keep him out of the scrap for a week of Sundays; or else clip off one of his ears, to stamp him as a low-down crook."

Jack knew full well that this was no idle threat on the part of his running mate; for Perk had a reputation as a pistol shot second to none in the entire service, being a natural born marksman.

He lapsed into a spell of silence after making that vicious remark; but from the way he glanced back again and again it looked as though Perk meant to keep close tabs on the craft that was dogging their own ship so steadily.

They were roaring on their way, and it would seem as if they must be showing a clean pair of heels to anything in their rear; but just the same, Perk, with the vision of an air-minded individual, could readily understand how the speedy Ryan plane was slowly but insidiously picking up on them continuously.

"Blamed nuisance," he was muttering to himself when this important fact became a positive truth; "guess now that rip-snorter could make circles round us, if so be he wanted to. Shucks! what's left to us I want to know; an' just what does he 'spect to accomplish with all this chasin' us? Might as well get out my little old six-shot bear gun, so's to be ready in case

there's any sort o' ruction aheadin' our way."

The idea seemed to afford him a strange sort of grim satisfaction, for bending down he ran his hand under the coaming of the cockpit; to almost immediately withdraw a very decent looking sporting repeating rifle, evidently his working tool whenever he felt disposed to spend a week in the wilds, either alone, or with some boon companions also yearning for wild game and the much desired campfire.

"Hold tight, Perk," Jack was saying just then; "going into a nose dive, and see if that will upset his calculations; for he's got me buffaloed all right as to what's in the wind!"

Almost immediately they turned the nose of their craft earthward, and went down on a swift slant. Perk kept his head turned even as this maneuvre was being executed, and what he saw was something calculated to almost take his breath away; for where the pursuing Ryan ship loomed up as a shadowy form, vivid splashes, as of fire, were coming in quick succession—he could even imagine he heard the pulsating staccato reports following each other in succession, just as in those never-to-be-forgotten days when he would have a covey of devil-may-care German air fighters stepping on the tail of his old-fashioned boat, and peppering him from their rapid-firing guns!

CHAPTER V

THE DUEL IN THE AIR

The significant flashes abruptly ceased; but Perk realized this was only because the expert pilot handling that same Ryan wasp was also ducking down in an exact copy of their own game.

For the moment Perk lost sight of the shadowy pursuing craft; then Jack changed his tactics, and once again brought his boat on an even keel. Perk strained his eyesight in an endeavor to pick up the other ship after it too had swung into a direct course.

"Devil take that guy at the stick," he stormed to himself, although Jack caught almost every word, since the earphones were still in operation, "he's seen our move, an' gone us one better. No slouch o' a pilot, either, I'll admit. When that gent who goes by the name o' Slippery Slim picks his gang he knows how to pull trumps out of the pack all right. Give him another shoot, Jack, old hoss; mebbe he wont be so lucky next time. He's got some kind o' a rapid-fire shooter aboard, and had started to send a hail

o' lead 'bout our ears just as you turned the trick on him."

Jack was apparently quite willing to give a repeat, for hardly had the other ceased shouting than they again shot down in a dizzy dive that seemed likely to lower their altitude by something like five hundred feet.

Perk was keeping a close watch, and knew that once more the grim pursuer had copied their daring maneuvre.

"He's a good one, or I'll eat my hat!" he burst out, as they were "cutting a blue streak" once more through the growing darkness, and he could see those suggestive flashes again punctuating the gloom in their track. "Jack, he's started that racket again, don't you know; and any second we may get a slug in our belly, bustin' things all to flinders. Try a razzle-dazzle on the boob, old broncho!"

So making a bank, Jack changed his course, running at right angles, and if anything at a faster pace than ever. Perk had the situation "sized up to a fraction," as he himself would have called it; he realized that it was only through the greatest of good luck they had escaped being hit by one of those flying missiles; and that so long as the mysterious enemy kept using their ship for a flying target they were in constant peril. Despite all this ducking and

dodging on Jack's part he did not seem successful in throwing the pursuing craft off the track. To be sure the darkness was gradually growing thicker with every passing minute, and this seemed to be their only hope of crawling out of a "hot hole," according to Perk's calculations.

Perk afterwards frankly admitted that he was frothing at the mouth on account of finding himself up against a situation where the cards seemed stacked against him—where his hands were tied as it were, and that reckless pilot, chasing after them hell-bent, held all the trumps.

"No use tryin' that game any longer, Jack, boy!" he yelled suddenly. "See the glim all 'round us, partner — sure as you live they've even got some kind o' a searchlight aboard, just like they'd planned all this thing out beforehand. Guess now it's up to Little Perk to put a plug into their game. Hold her steady a bit, boss; I'm meaning to make 'em sit up an' take notice they can't hog *all* the fun going. Watch my smoke, Jack, old hoss."

It was a delicate situation without any doubt; for if those aboard that little Ryan plane, taking advantage of the halo of light covering the craft they followed, continued to make use of their rapidfire gun, the danger of a hit had vastly increased; but Perk must have some sort of scheme in mind it was evident, or he would never have

asked his chum to steady the badly wobbling boat when such action only doubled their peril.

Calmly and deliberately, as though simply bent on fetching down a deer he wanted for his next camp supper, steady old Perk had his faithful gun up to his shoulder, and was sighting that piercing glare of light that marked the bow of the pursuing aircraft, betraying the presence of a searchlight.

Possibly owing to the clamor of their own working motor Jack could not tell when his companion unloosed a fusilage of shots; but he did know that something suddenly changed the situation, and to their advantage; for as though a blanket had been tossed over the piercing ray the illumination abruptly ceased, leaving them to continue their wild flight shrouded in encompassing darkness.

Then, too, the sound of Perk's exulting yell was quite enough to tell the story of his success in finding a glowing target for one of his several missiles — the old sharpshooter had evidently lost none of his cunning by reason of a lapse in action.

"Set 'em up in the other alley, boys—give your Dutch uncle a chance to show an old trick or two! Now *will* you be good, or must I give you another smash in the jaw—better haul off

while the haulin's good, fellers—I'd sure hate to make you crack up, and fade out!"

Even though his clever shot had doubtless utterly smashed the searchlight, and put it out of business, that bothersome rapidfire gun was still in working order, as Perk discovered when once more those insistent flashes, following closely upon each others' heels, announced a fresh barrage, with the unseen, unheard hissing bullets doubtless whizzing all around them.

This was adding insult to injury, Perk was doubtless telling himself, as he realized that his lucky shot had after all failed to daunt that stubborn pair in the speedy Ryan ship.

"You *will* have it, seems like," he growled to himself; for since he had discarded his earphone harness just previous to starting his late "shooting spree," Perk could no longer hold intercourse with his fellow flyer; "all right then, I'll try some more o' the same sorter medicine; what's good for the goose orter be fine for the gander. Mind your eye now, boys, and keep a tight grip on your chutes if anything happens not down in your gamble."

Again did the continual flash of spitting fire from the gun afford the sharpshooter in the chased ship abundant opportunities for focussing his aim; although instinct may have taken the place of vision on Perk's part.

Fortunately Jack must have been expecting something along those lines, knowing his companion so well, and how he was always eager to "repeat" when things were coming his way; for he kept the flying boat wonderfully steady just then, even though realizing how such action doubled their own chances of being hit.

Perk was now shooting on general principles, in hopes of being fortunate enough to find a billet for one of his random bullets. He went at the business with all the *sang froid* of a veteran fighter, accustomed to meeting hostile craft up in the wide air spaces, or even above the clouds—all the fierce delight of matching his skill and life against a foeman worthy of his steel had once more gripped the old flying warrior; and it may be for the moment he deluded himself with the belief that this was but a reincarnation of those never-to-be-forgotten days when all Europe was held fast in the throes of the grisly war-god.

Suddenly Perk ceased firing, nor was this caused by the magazine of his repeating rifle being empty—he had seen that the discharges back yonder were no longer in full blast, showing that something must have happened to cause such a sudden cessation to hostilities.

Before he could attempt to analyze what this might mean it was all flashed before his ques-

tioning mind—a burst of flames came from the spot where last he had seen the shadowy shape of their persistent pursuer clipping through space like a blazing meteor.

Perk sat there doubled up, his mouth half open, staring with might and main, as some object began to drop toward the earth with ever increasing speed—something which he knew full well must of necessity be the beautiful little Ryan plane, which he had admired so much when at Candler Field at close of the late day, and before this wild dash into the darkness of night began.

Evidently one of his missiles (fired with such grim determination when he "took the bit in his teeth," and struck back) had found its mark, and unleashed the dangerous contents of the gasoline reservoir, with the splashing fluid instantly catching fire from the exploding spark of the running motor.

No flyer ever saw his enemy going down in a flaming coffin without feeling compassion gripping him; that one moment had changed his heart from bitter hatred to a sense of pity; knowing as he must have done that the day might be near at hand when he too would share in a similar dreadful fate.

And so Perk found himself all in a nervous tremble as, laying down his gun, he managed

once more to adjust the head harness, so as to be able to again hold communication with his fellow adventurer.

CHAPTER VI

PARACHUTE JUMPERS

Just then Jack hurriedly banked, and swung around as though to double back on their late course. This of course told Perk the pilot must be already aware of the terrible tragedy that was being enacted close at hand, and meant to see its finish with his own eyes.

With the abrupt change in their course he was in time to catch a glimpse of the flaming object still spiraling earthwards, a billow of fire that glowed suggestively in the darkness.

Then far below it seemed to strike the ground —they heard no sound whatever, but the fire became stationary; although increasing in fury, since the wind created by its passage no longer whipped the devouring flames. Evidently by the time the conflagration stopped for want of further material on which to feed, nothing inflammable would be left of the once haughty little Ryan masterpiece save the engine, and other metal parts.

"What's the big idea, old hoss?"

Perk asked this as a leader, wishing to get a

better grip on his own nerves, since they had been dreadfully shocked at the dire result of his random shot.

"Going to circle around a few times, and drop down a bit," came the illuminating reply; "though I reckon it's no use, since nothing could live in all that awful blast."

"Mebbe not, Jack," remarked Perk, a bit cheerily; "but there's a fair chance neither o' them guys got snagged in the flash o' that gas."

"See here, Perk, have you some foundation for saying that?" demanded the other, eagerly.

"Sure — they jumped all right, boss," Perk told him.

"You saw them do it then, did you, boy?" continued Jack.

"They bailed out okay—I saw two take the jump right after the first flash came—went down like plummets in the bargain—smart lads those guys are, I'm tellin' you, partner."

No doubt Jack was glad to hear this bit of news, for it had filled him with horror to realize that in order to escape they had been compelled to ruthlessly take human life. He was much younger than Perk, veteran of the World War, who had grown more or less hardened to such happenings when staking his own life against that of a tricky German air pilot.

"Still goin' down, are you?" asked Perk short-

ly afterwards, on finding that they were still swinging around in a wide circle, that burning pyre far below being the hub of the wheel of which their boat was the outer tire.

"Might as well," came the ready answer, showing that Jack had made up his mind hurriedly.

"Guess now they'll get down somehow, boss; a whole lot depends on what kind o' landin' they'll be able to make—if its rocks, or trees, they got to strike it's apt to be some hard sleddin' for the boys. Say, 'taint possible now you're fixin' to try an' lend 'em a helpin' hand? I'd hate to know they'd been wiped off the map in that hot fire; but somehow I don't feel like playin' the part o' the Good Samaritan to such man devils as them two."

"No danger of my trying to make a landing where the chances are ten to one it just *can't* be done," explained Jack, seeing that his companion was almost ready to mutiny if any such mad proceeding were contemplated. "I'd just feel better if I knew they'd reached ground okay; then we could keep on our way, and it'd be up to them to get out of the scrape."

"Huh! I get you, partner," grunted the relieved Perk. "Don't think I'm bitter about the thing, 'cause they're sure hot stuff all right; but I'm a bit slow to accept that forgive and forget

stuff, specially after any guy's tried his level best to gimme a dirty deal."

"We'll try the thing out while on the job," Jack announced. "Our own wonderful escape from meeting just that same kind of fate makes me kind of soft. Perhaps we'll not be able to learn a single thing; you know how it often is when you've finally struck ground after quitting the ship by the chute route—all out of breath—sometimes knocked up a bit, if you escape broken bones—not any shape to shout, or do anything but just lie there, and suck in the air in big gasps."

"Yeah, that's right for you, old hoss," Perk readily agreed. "Me, I once got a collar bone smashed that way. No harm in our makin' a few swings around these diggin's 'fore we put out for Orleans. That fire keeps burnin' like things they got sprinkled right well with the juice when the tank blew up. Go to it, Jack, just as you please, never mindin' a few squeals from a hard-boiled guy like Perk Perkiser."

"I'm going to shut down on the engine, and take a little glide, so we can pick up anything like a yell," announced the pilot a minute later.

"Go to it—duck then, boy!" snapped Perk, as he temporarily relieved himself of his ear-phones in order to catch anything bordering on a shout from the ground below.

The simple expedient was carried out successfully, and when once again they leveled out, to continue circling, Jack asked eagerly:

"Get anything, Perk?"

"Not a bleat, partner," replied the other, who had hurriedly held his earphones in position so as to cover the emergency.

"Sorry for that, but we'll try a couple more times before calling it all off," suggested Jack, who could be more or less persistent when the occasion arose for such action, though never carrying it so far as to be reckless.

So a dozen seconds or so afterwards he again gave warning that it was time for another drop of a few hundred feet—not that they meant to take any chances by getting too close to the unknown terrain lying in the pitch blackness under the flying ship; but simply to be able to listen with the horrid clamor of the bustling engine momentarily stilled.

No better success followed this second maneuvre—all was deathly silent around, above, below, as though never a solitary living human being existed within miles of the spot where the destruction of the Ryan monoplane had taken place.

"We'll give a third and last try," was Jack's announced decision, to which Perk added:

"Three times, and batter's out—by then I rath-

er guess we'll be down close enough to the solid ground to make another drop dangerous. Either way I'm satisfied we've done the right thing, old hoss. Suit yourself when you see fit to coast," whereupon he once more denuded his ears of the exceedingly useful and really indispensable phone harness, to await the occasion of the last try in the line of an aviator's duty.

"How about it, Perk?—get a whisper?"

They had completed the glide, and were once more on a level course, with Jack even turning the nose of the ship a bit heavenward; since neither of them knew what the nature of the ground below must be—whether some hill lay directly ahead, against which they might smash for a complete wipeout.

"Huh! a heap more'n that, partner!" came the triumphant reply. "Heard a shout, an' then another some distance off — struck me both jumpers had lit okay, and were tryin' to communicate, so's to get together again. Guess things ain't so bad after all with them guys, an' we c'n be movin' on our way without botherin' any more 'bout their safety. Some two-legged varmints seem to be watched over by Old Satan hisself, they bein' that venomous, and evil-minded."

Jack made no rejoinder to this remark, tinged

with bitterness as it was, only pointed the nose of his craft upward, and started to spiral for altitude. Undoubtedly he was feeling greatly relieved because of their having escaped so miraculously from the hovering peril; and best of all managed to turn the tables on those who would have encompassed their destruction just in order to defend the lawless game in which they were engaged in connection with Slippery Slim.

Perk must have been doing a little hard thinking as the time passed and they raced on their way, for later on he started to speak; and as usual his line of chatter told that he was seeking information, trying to find a solution of certain exasperating puzzles that were "twisting his intellects," as he himself described matters.

"Things kind o' got me goofy, partner, an' I'd like you to raise the curtain some, if so be you feel so bent. First place I guess it goes without questionin' that these huskies must be in cohunks with that there big gun, Slippery Slim Garrabrant?"

"Oh! that's a dead certainty—who else would have any reason for waylaying us in Atlanta, and setting up this trap for us to fall into?"

"Shucks! then it stands to reason, boss, he's

got means for findin' out what the Secret Service aims to do; an' so has been able to play the boys for suckers every time they set out to lay him by the heels, eh, Jack, old hoss?"

"That's past history, Perk; even the Big Boss got wise to it, and tried everything possible to learn where the great leak happened; but our experience proves they haven't discovered it so far. I'm making up my mind that the closer we draw to the headquarters of this rotten clique of crime, where they make the bogus long-green that's been flooding the whole West for a year and more, why, the harder our job is bound to be."

"Which tickles me a heap, boy — I'm just yearnin' for comin' to grips with that gazaboo o' a Slim; and now we're on to the job I'll never be happy 'till he's on his way to that big Government pen we glimpsed in Atlanta, where some other lads we helped to pinch are doin' time."

"Well, if you keep on as you've started, Perk, we'll flatten the whole gang like pancakes— they've stacked up against a new sort of revenue dog when they started a shooter of your calibre on the trail. First you smashed their searchlight, and then sent a chuck of lead into the gas tank that broke up the game. That's the kind of a pinch hitter you are, partner; and

right now I want to congratulate you on such dandy marksmanship."

"Lay off that stuff, Jack—nothin' but great luck fetched the bacon home for this lad. But me, I'm shakin' hands with myself 'cause I had that hunch a bear gun mightn't be such a bad thing to tote along on a trip that's goin' to carry us across the border, an' into Old Mex, like as not; where the greasers are sometimes tough nuts an' hard to handle they tell me." 'Spose we'll run across them two hill billies again, partner?"

"Wouldn't surprise me a bit if we did," replied the pilot, leveling off at a three thousand foot ceiling, and still heading due southwest. "Like as not they've got plenty of ready cash along; and after having been so cleverly upset in their calculations, due to your beating them silly with a barrage of hot lead, they'll be hot to wipe out their disgrace. Oh! yes, we're going to run up against that foxey pair again before the book is closed for keeps."

CHAPTER VII

STRIKING THE FOG BELT

With the stars shining brightly above them, and a moon just past its full climbing the eastern heavens, having dissipated the darkness of the earlier part of the night, Jack and his fellow voyager continued plunging along in a very satisfactory fashion, having no reason for feeling further concern regarding the peril to which they had been so lately subjected.

But things were not destined to continue so comfortably for the two adventurers, it seemed. Perk was just congratulating himself for about the fourth time at having such a comfortable flight, when he sat up and took notice of the fact tact those heavenly bodies were beginning to look exceedingly hazy.

"Danged shame, that's what, to spoil such a dandy night!" he muttered.

"What ails you now?" demanded Jack, on hearing the other make this little remark that bespoke exasperation at least; "another boat on our tail?"

"Well, I guess not just now," replied Perk,

scoffingly; one was more'n enough for a single jump. But we're agoin' to run into a pesky fog belt, sure as you're born, old hoss!"

"That all?" laughed the other, who apparently saw nothing of particular consequence about such a common happening; "it may perhaps manage to slow us down more or less; but what does that matter, when we've got time to burn. The Big Boss told us, remember, not to hurry things at all—plenty of time, oodles of money, and any backing we chose to call for in the way of a new boat, or more helpers. We should worry, old scout!"

"'Tain't that in peticular Jack," complained the other; "but of all things a sky detective's got to run smack up against, fog's the one I despise most. It's got me in bad more'n a few times, so I've grown to look on the peasoup stuff like it was my—er, what-dye-call it—Nebraska, no, I mean Nemesis."

"Yes, now you mention it, Perk, I remember you telling me something about that strange feeling you have creep over you. No need for you to apologize—in my knocking around among airmen I've found that often even the most daring and reckless in the bunch had some kind of a weakness, if only you looked far enough under the surface; just as sometimes you'll find a boasting bully actually afraid of his little wife at

home, who's smacked him with her handy rolling pin many a time."

"Huh! wasn't I a canvas man 'long with a travelin' circus a wheen o' years ago, an' didn't I see the biggest elephant in captivity rear up on his hind legs, lift his trunk sky-high in the air, an' squeal like fun just when a little half grown mouse happened to run along near his alley. Well, I'm the tusker, an' fog is the mouse, as you might say—we never do get on well as a combine. Hope it hugs the ground, an' leaves us a clear track up among the clouds I c'n see creepin' up ahead yonder."

"Doesn't bother me a whit, partner; don't forget we've got that new radio beacon aboard to try out; and if it's as clever as I've heard tell it'll carry us along our route to Orleans through the thickest nest of fog anybody ever stacked up against. Naturally we can't expect to get the full benefit of its capacity to hold a speeding plane on its true course; because the invention's hardly more than half baked up to now; but I set it according to directions, and if at any time we begin to slide off our course the light that springs up is bound to give warning."

"A bully good layout I'd say, if it c'n do what they claim," ventured Perk, who undoubtedly had read certain things concerning the new invention, and was eager to learn just how it would

pan out. "You showed a level head, partner, when you decided to take the offer o' that gent in Atlanta, and try the thing out. Guess, then, I needn't bother my head 'bout gettin' astray; if things keep bein' invented it ain't goin' to be very long till a pilot'll get slapped good an' hard if he misses runnin' on a straight line, or even veers from his proper course in a great big blow."

"We're living in a machine age, Perk, and every day things are heading that way on the run—electric helps in kitchen, factory, and even aboard our air cruisers. While the brainwork and strain grow harder the actual manual labor is lessened all the time. But as you say it's getting a bit hazy, and chances are we're in for a spell of blue fog."

Ten minutes afterwards there could not be the least doubt concerning that fact, for by degrees even the stars vanished from view, ditto the gorgeous round moon. Still, since the sky remained brighter in the east, it was not at all difficult to tell where the fair mistress of the Southern night had hidden her face behind the opaque veil.

Jack was now flying by instruments alone, since never a thing could be seen by the keenest eye above, below—they seemed to be hung in unlimited space; but pushing along with con-

siderable speed just the same, bound for the distant city on the vast Mississippi, situated not so very far from its delta.

Thus passed a full hour.

Suddenly Perk saw a small light spring into view on one side of the plane, and it certainly electrified him considerably.

"Hi! there, partner, we're off our track—shifted to the east, seems like, unless I'm away wrong in sizin' things up 'cordin' to Hoyle. Got to swing her to the larboard-watch side, I kinder guess—how 'bout that, boss?"

"You hit it that time, Perk, and here she goes to climb back to our true course. Worked just as we figured it would, and put us wise to a fact we'd hardly have picked up in any other way. I reckon now this same radio beacon's bound to turn out a great help to the poor badgered air pilot, flying blind when fog hides the ground beacons, and he gets no aid from the heavens above."

"I'll say it's the best thing I've struck for a long time," affirmed the delighted Perk. "There she goes—the glim I mean—closed shop, havin' 'complished the business set for her; showing we must have struck our real course again.

"Easy money," laughed Jack, just as well satisfied. "Makes a fellow sit up and try to guess

what the next big idea connected with aviation will prove to be; doesn't seem to be any limit to the dazzling discoveries these scientific chaps'll turn out."

"Just so, partner—like that big chute they're trying out, which they claim will keep any plane from crashing—if the engine goes dead all you got to do is to press a little button, and when the drop comes open goes the monster umbrella, able to hold you and the crate suspended in the air, to gradually fall to the earth like the colored balls from a bursted skyrocket. Great stunt that, an' I'm livin' in hopes it'll be my luck to some day find myself aboard a ship that's equipped with such a giant chute, an' have the glorious experience of seeing the thing work."

Jack seemed to consider it the part of wisdom to pull up more or less, as they were in no hurry, and could drop down on the aviation field at New Orleans by dawn, even though they concluded to just "loaf along." Disliking anything pertaining to fog Perk naturally said nothing to hint at a desire for further speed; besides his own good sense told him that what his mate had just said with regard to no necessity existing for haste, was sound logic, and a due regard for "safety first."

So the time slipped away, with midnight finding them past the meridian of their projected

flight. Perk had long since subsided and seemed content to sit there in the double cockpit, letting his thoughts roam back to the exciting developments of the earlier night.

Years had elapsed since last he watched a doomed plane writhing and twisting in its death agonies, with the flames wrapping it in an envelope—a blazing coffin speeding headlong to a final crash; and here, strange to say, after all that time intervening he had again passed through a similar experience. Now that he had an opportunity to calmly review the happening, Perk admitted he was pleased to know the two occupants of the Ryan cockpit had apparently escaped a miserable fate that must have been laid at his door.

Two A. M. and all's well!

Perk figured that when a few more times sixty minutes had passed it would be time for them to catch a first glimpse of the great rolling turgid stream that could, when the heavy rains united with the melting snows up in the mountains of the Far West, create vast floods that placed much of the low country along the river under many feet of water. It had been a long time since last Perk had set eyes on the Mississippi, and hence he was considerably worked up over the prospect of soon glimpsing the mighty flood.

CHAPTER VIII

NEW ORLEANS—FIRST STOP

"There she rolls, Jack, old boy—the greatest stream in the whole U. S. A.—I swan if she don't look just as fine as when I glimpsed her for the first time many years ago!"

That was Perk's tribute on beholding the Lower Mississippi perhaps thirty miles above New Orleans; he displayed almost as much enthusiasm as those early discoverers did centuries back, when their distended eyes took in the mighty sweep of the flood rolling down toward its junction with the Mexican Gulf.

It was early dawn, and the fog bank had been dissipated by a fresh breeze acting as advance courier to the rising of the sun. Jack, looking toward the southwest could also see the object of his companion's exultation, and undoubtedly felt some of the same pleasure.

"When it gets a bit lighter we'll have a far distant view of the city, with its smoke cloud hovering over it," he remarked, knowing that soft coal and southern pine as used for fuel in the Fall and Winter seasons always caused something of

a pall to mark the site of the river metropolis.

Perk reached around, and drew forth a case that on being opened disclosed a pair of pretty decent binoculars, with which they had been fitted out by the Washington authorities before starting on this particular man-hunt, with an idea that they might prove most useful sooner or later.

After clapping these to his eyes Perk announced that he could easily pick up the goal of their flight from Candler Field; although the smoke did act as a screen, through which it was not possible to see with certainty.

Jack was now bringing out all the reserve speed of their ship—it was of some consequence that they make a landing as early as possible, since he had no desire to attract undue attention, and possibly have inquisitive newspaper reporters to be asking pertinent questions as to whence they came, what their identities might be when at home, and also concerning the object of their coming to New Orleans. Secrecy was the foundation on which they meant to build their plans; and from their previous experience with those dare devils in the employ of Slippery Slim, too much care could not be employed in order to mask their batteries.

So, too, as they approached the city Jack was dropping down to lower levels; while on his part

Perk skimmed the whole scene, looking for the airport they knew to be somewhere within reach of their vision.

This being presently located he called his chum's attention to the open field, and in almost no time they were circling it, looking for the best place to land.

Early though it was there were moving figures circulating around, while some sort of ship was coming in from over the river—possibly one of the air mail carriers from a distant station, it might be many hundred miles away, fetching Uncle Sam's important letter sacks, and worthwhile express matter, at treble the speed that the fastest train could muster.

The landing was effected without the slightest difficulty, and hardly had their boat come to a stop than a number of persons, most of them connected with the ground force of mechanicians and hostlers, surrounded the incoming craft, paying but scant attention to the air mail, which dropped down almost at the same moment—that was a daily happening, a following out of a regular schedule, to which they had become accustomed; while the arrival of a mysterious plane might stand for almost anything.

"Hold fast, Perk!" said Jack, as he took off his headphones, and raising his voice to almost a shout, so deaf did he appear after a whole

night's run; "don't tumble out yet; and keep a muffler on your gab, for we've got to let 'em take it out in guessing. I'll soon see if the party we're expecting to meet is on hand."

He still kept his helmet and goggles in position as he thrust his head out of the cockpit, and raising his right hand with two fingers extended, made a species of salute. A stout man, with a very red face, and an air of importance, immediately pushed through the gathering crowd, and answered Jack's signal with a similar sweep of his hand.

"It's okay, Perk—that's our party, and he's been watching for us, showing he had my wire last evening. Get a move on, and we'll soon be doubling our legs under a breakfast table."

"Glory be! but that will be a joy to me, old hoss!" Perk exclaimed; "'cause I'm as hungry as a wolf, an' the smell o' coffee is apt to set me wild. Go to it, partner."

Jack was paying no attention to these vaporings, since it was a common occurrence to have old Perk declare the bottom of his stomach was in danger of falling out—he had met the red-faced gentleman and they were shaking hands as they exchanged a few words.

"It's all fixed, comrade," he said to Perk over his shoulder, mentioning no names lest suspicious ears catch them, and thus have a clue as

to their identity; "we'll get a few of these boys to run our boat into a hangar close by, which is waiting for us, and then cut out for the city—and grub."

This being speedily carried out, with the doors fastened securely, and the two flyers began to hastily divest themselves of their working "duds." Before ten minutes had passed they were on their way in a taxi the gentleman friend had brought out, with Jack and their host talking at a great rate; while as for Perk he was looking out, and finding more or less enjoyment in seeing new and novel sights along the road.

Perk having been well coached as to the necessity for caution, made it a practice to snatch an occasional glance in their rear, looking for any signs to indicate that their car was being trailed; but nothing at all suspicious came to his attention.

Meantime Jack had learned that their new friend (whose name he already knew to be Mr. Adkins) was connected with the Administration forces of the United States District Attorney, having offices in the Government building—that he had been secretly advised of their coming days before receiving Jack's wire; and was ready to give them all the information possible concerning what had been learned in connection

with the wholesale operations of the man they had been sent out to cage, so as to effectually remove the greatest menace that had threatened business men of the Southwest in a decade.

In due time he would post them regarding all these important facts; meanwhile they could take things easy, for there was no hurry, and the game was of too much importance to allow lax methods. When they got good and ready they could make a start, and after that everything must depend on their ability to beat Slippery Slim at his favorite game of "dog eat dog."

He steered his guests to a certain restaurant where he knew they could be well taken care of, and which turned out to be close to the hotel at which they booked under fictitious names. Here Perk was given the privilege of ordering just what he desired along the line of rashers of bacon and fried eggs; cornbread with syrup; several cups of coffee taken black; and to top off with, a Havana cigar such as he was not accustomed to smoking, being addicted to the more friendly pipe habit.

There was no talk of shop while they partook of breakfast; such business as they had to transact was of too delicate a nature to be discussed in a public place, where strangers would be

coming and going, and spying eyes might be on them every minute of the time.

Later they gathered in the room at the hotel where, behind closed and locked doors they felt free to confer in lowered tones.

Much had to be told, and numerous thrilling accounts brought out connected with adventures experienced by other Secret Service men in their efforts to round up the notorious gang—all of which had resulted in absolute defeat for the Government agents.

Shrewd men some of these parties undoubtedly were, with a record of numerous famous cases successfully carried through; but somehow when they found themselves up against Slippery Slim Garrabrant they sooner or later fell down on the job, and had to be recalled.

In fact, it was disclosed to Jack and his pal, two different agents were never again heard from, after secret code messages had been received from them to the effect that they were even then getting very close to a great discovery that must end in the arrest of the malefactor —a dead silence that had never been broken seemed to signify that they must have fallen into some sort of fiendish trap, possibly meeting with a gruesome fate that would be forever shrouded in blank mystery.

Mr. Adkins, watching closely as he narrated

these uncomfortable facts, was pleased to see that neither of his interested auditors displayed the least sign of being disturbed, showing that they had long since discounted everything along this line.

CHAPTER IX

COACHING PERK

Of course it was in keeping with this exchange of confidences that Jack should relate all that had happened to them since their arrival in Atlanta to secure the ship awaiting them, load it to capacity for a long voyage, and finally start off from Candler Field.

Mr. Adkins listened eagerly to this modest account of what had already happened to them as a starter in the hunt they had undertaken; and he was visibly thrilled at hearing of the bitter night chase, the desperate tactics undertaken by the pair of human wolves aboard the Ryan monoplane; and particularly when Jack finally described in vivid language the astounding act of Perk in first shattering the bothersome searchlight, to follow this with his lucky random shot that bore into the gas tank of the pursuing craft and brought about an explosion.

Possibly the urbane gentleman had never in all his life listened to so ghastly a true story as the graphic one thus modestly related by one of the two participants; looking at them, with

Jack so calm and modest, giving all the credit to his grinning accomplice, he must have decided in his astute mind that at last Slippery Slim was going to have a pair of human bloodhounds on his trail such as all his ingenuity and vindictiveness combined could not throw into the discard.

"Let me have," he went on to say to Jack, "as good a description as possible of those same bills your friend Scotty found in that pocketbook dropped among his clothing by the unknown party whom you believe was looking for your letter of instructions from Washington."

When Jack complied with this request the other nodded his head approvingly.

"No question but what they were of the same stripe as all the others that have been brought to our attention," he told Jack. "You must know it's been a mooted question as to whether the plates from which these notes are being printed in vast quantities (that make it a gold mine for the gang) are counterfeits engraved by some master in the art or stolen property, which have somehow never been missed by the plant where much of the printing is done for the Treasury Department—the bills are so perfect that cashiers and tellers are all at sea over the facts, so that something of a near panic has resulted in banking circles as a result of this unknown quan-

tity. Remember these are the old type of bank-notes, and not the new abbreviated form of currency, so that it is more difficult to discover the actual facts."

"It will all come out in the wash, sir," remarked Perk, sagaciously, with a sly wink at his pal.

"Just so, Perk," observed the gentlemanly official, smilingly; "but I'm more concerned about your plan of campaign than anything else right now. During the time you stop over here in Orleans I mean to keep you posted with regard to any fresh news that comes in to Headquarters for there is hardly a day when we do not learn of additional discoveries connected with this deluge of phony money that's been dumped on the whole Southwest by this hard working gang. I am telling you everything that's known or suspected, so that you can figure out your best line of action."

"We understand that, Mr. Adkins," said Jack, nodding, "and you can rest assured we appreciate your kindness more than I can tell you. Before we jump off you will know what we've decided to do, so as to pick up a warm trail; and after that, sir, don't be worried if you fail to hear a single word from us for days, weeks, or even months; but depend upon it we'll be working on the job every minute."

"And never forget, I beg of you, that this man is a devil for cruelty and craftiness—I'm sure you'll not delude yourselves that his arrest will be an easy task; for as good men as were ever on the roll of our Secret Service Department have fallen down on the job."

"Thank you again, sir, for your warning; but we're not meaning to feel anything like overconfidence, so as to let the bars down. I understand from my having been picked to take up this case, that the knowledge of myself and my assistant here along the line of aviation cut a big figure in the appointment, since it has been learned that Slim himself makes use of a flying boat possibly to cross over from the wilds of Mexico, it being suspected he has his plant hidden away somewhere among the mountains, where he doubtless keeps peace with the authorities by paying tribute that insures his being left undisturbed. We hope to change all that sooner or later, sir."

"I admire your modesty, Jack," continued the Government official, who had warmed toward the pair during the short time he had known them, and seemed to take a personal interest in their fortunes. "Remember to keep in touch with Headquarters while in the city, so as to notify me in case you need any assistance—I can later on place a posse of oldtime Texas Rangers

at your service, if the occasion arises for a necessity to show force—they are now working for the Government as border patrols, and as you can understand, are the same rough-riding, fearless type that played such a leading figure in the early history of the Lone Star State; for we have authority that covers such matters. And I'll be one of the first to extend you my hearty congratulations should you win out, and bring in your man; as I've no doubt your good pal here used to do when, as you've told me, he used to work with the Canadian Mounted Police force, in years gone by."

"It won't be our fault, sir, if we make a flop o' the job," asserted Perk, who believed he ought to get in an occasional word; although there were a good many things he did not wholly understand, and which he would depend on Jack to further explain when opportunity arose.

Mr. Adkins shook them both cordially by the hand, and took his departure, leaving them to digest all the startling facts he had placed in their possession. By slow degrees they would figure things out, and sketch their plan of operation; then would come the hour when once more they must depend on their wings to carry them many hundreds of miles toward the scene of action, where the air would be surcharged with

dynamite, while deadly enemies might be lying in ambush, ready to take them by surprise.

Perk started to spring his questions, and Jack was only too glad to make the necessary explanations; for it was necessary that they work in complete harmony if they hoped to be successful.

As far as they had gone, things looked hopeful to Jack, as he marshalled the facts that had lately been placed in their possession. He was satisfied that when every item had been arranged in its rightful sequence they could fashion a plan of campaign that would at least have a better chance for winning out than any of those utilized by former detectives, who had not possessed the essential wings so as to meet Slippery Slim on his own chosen ground.

"No tellin' just how long we'll stick it out in this burgh, I guess, buddy?" suggested Perk, some time later, as they continued to take things easy, resting up after a hard night's flight, and meaning to get around the city after noon and lunch time had come and passed.

"Couldn't say as yet, Perk; we've got to comb out the stuff as handed over by our new friend, Mr. Adkins, and discard everything that doesn't pan out as being worth while. Then there were a few leaders he dropped that, if followed up, might turn out to be leading clues, the possession

of which would possibly turn the tide of battle. I'm meaning not to let anything make me show undue speed—Rome wasn't built in a day, we've got to recollect, and so shape things from the standpoint of 'safety first'."

"Huh! that's the boy!" gurgled the pleased Perk; "me, don't I remember that story o' the hare an' the tortoise runnin' a race, which the turtle won 'cause he never even stopped to rest up; while the rabbit, thinkin' he could run loops around such a plodder, lay down to take a nap, overslept himself, and when he got to the goal there was Old Leatherback awaitin' to turn the big laugh on him."

Perk wound up with one of his rollicking laughs; everything seemed to create merriment in his soul just now, after that royal breakfast; though perhaps he was running away ahead of the dry facts, and counting his chickens before they were hatched out of the shell. But Perk was confident the sly fox of a Slim would find himself snagged in the net one of these days, and the clever guy who handled things would turn out to be an aviator and sky detective named Jack Ralston.

Jack some time afterwards, had just aroused from a short nap, when Perk, who had been pondering and grumbling to himself, tossed out

another question, as if to disclose what was troubling him:

"How about it, old hoss, do you b'lieve them dicks we left behind after they'd floated down from a high ceilin' with their chutes, got outen the scrape, so they could a hiked to some nearby village or town, an' took the first train headed for Orleans, reckonin' we must a'been on the jump thisaways?"

"I'd say the chances all point that way, Perk," Jack told him, without the slightest hesitation.

"Jumpin' crickets! if that's a fact why, a feller might run acrost the slick pair any old minute—meet 'em right face to face!" Perk went on to say, as if the fact gave him more or less concern.

"I suppose then you'd recognize the chappies with just one look, eh, what about that, partner?" asked Jack, laughingly; at which the other grinned a bit foolishly, to admit he had serious doubts on that score.

"Shucks! didn't either o' us get a peep-in at their monikers, worse luck—had them helmets and goggles in place right away, like they didn't mean to give us a single look-in. S'pose now they got the high sign on us boys?"

"On a venture I'd say that was always possible," replied Jack, soberly; for this very point had occurred to him, and was as yet unsettled

in his mind. "Nobody knows how long they may have been in Atlanta—Mr. Adkins assured us Slim seemed to have all sorts of strings out, so as to learn in advance of any bunch of Government agents taking the field against his giant bogus money monopoly; and for all we can tell those two may have been spying on us most of the time we were around Candler Field, getting our ship ready to take to the air."

"Rotten luck, I'm sayin', and too much one-sided to suit me," growled Perk, frowning savagely. "Here we got to do our work in the dark; while that smart cuss holds all the high cards in the pack, an' c'n trump our ace any time he takes a notion."

"No need to worry about that, comrade," said Jack, soothingly. "You must remember that when we move along we mean to disappear as if heading into the thickest belt of pea soup fog ever seen—in that way they'll lose all trace of us, and we can play our cards as we choose, making up for a different breed of sky travelers, so as to dope the cleverest kind of spies he can send out. While they're left guessing what's become of us we'll be doing our little tracking job, and hour by hour, day after day, keep on creeping closer to their secret stronghold, wherever that may prove to be. Those are some of the things we figured on doing, Perk, don't forget."

The one addressed made no reply, but as he let his head fall back, as if he meant to pick up a few winks of sleep, there came a look of rapt admiration on his weather-beaten face that bespoke the utmost confidence in his best pal.

CHAPTER X

LAYING PLANS

After a noonday lunch Jack and his partner spent most of the afternoon in carrying out the various duties that were seemingly on their program. Among other things Jack visited the Federal building, and was closeted for more than an hour with Mr. Adkins.

The latter official had conceived a great fancy for young Ralston, and went to no end of trouble so as to post him with regard to what he was likely to run up against while endeavoring to close in on Slippery Slim. With his accustomed sagacity Jack made notes of some of the facts thus laid before him; but since these were in shorthand, and would be utterly unintelligible to any outside party, should they chance to fall into enemy hands, there was no danger that any mischief would follow.

By degrees he was filling up with scraps of description, and everything connected with former attempts at locating the hideout, where all this unlawful scrip was being turned off the press, to flood the Southwest.

That was always his way of doing—when given a tough job Jack would live alongside it, breathing the very atmosphere of the undertaking, until he found himself sympathetic with the aims and ambitions of the criminals whose apprehension was placed on his shoulders by his Big Boss.

"We'll have dinner early, Perk," he told the other, who had been carrying out a number of special duties while Jack was busy elsewhere, "so as to retire to our room at the hotel. No going out after nightfall for us just at present, especially in a strange city, where some sneak might waylay us coming back from the theater. All that sort of pleasure must be put out of our heads just at present."

"Huh! guess you're hittin' the nail on the head, old hoss, when you say that," grunted Perk, who very probably had already picked out just the screen play he wanted so badly to see; but he was a good scout, and able to put duty above pleasure, when the occasion arose for making a personal sacrifice.

"Another thing," continued Jack, "there's no telling what night flying we're bound to be up against, in trying to keep our movements secret; so it'd be wise for us both to enjoy all the extra sleep that comes our way."

"I get you, partner," assented Perk, subordinating his desires to the slogan which he knew was Jack's watchword—"safety first." "When I've stowed away all the grub I c'n hold mebbe I'll be ready to hit the hay, to stick it out till cock-crow around daylight—an' then some. Pretty fair sleeper, they always called me across the big pond—crawl out as the last horn was blowin', rub my eyes a bit, get aboard my fightin' crate, an' step off to knock another Heine pilot down afore botherin' 'bout my breakfast—all in a day's doings with Gabe Perkiser. Sabbe that, partner?"

"Yes, I know you like a book," Jack told him with a smile.

"Get a bellyfull when you had that confab with Mr. Adkins?" demanded Perk.

"I'm filled up to the brim with all kinds of material, which by degrees I'll have to sort out, keeping only what strikes me as essential," came the answer.

"I see—sorter separatin' the chaff from the wheat," mused Perk; "an' if it's a fair question, old hoss, which way do we head when we take off?"

"You might call it due northeast," Jack told him; and then, as his companion uttered a startled exclamation, as though vastly surprised, Jack gave a quick glance around as if to make

certain that no one was dogging their footsteps, after which he lowered his voice almost to a whisper, to add: "but that would be only for a *blind,* in case hostile eyes were watching our departure from the flying field; for after we've cleared a dozen or more miles we can make a complete circle, and point the nose of our boat squarely west!"

"Good boy!" snapped the relieved Perk; "sounds a heap more like it. You sure did throw a big scare into me, Jack, 'cause it'd been 'bout settled 'tween us that the game had ought to be played out there in the boundless waste spaces around the border.

"Yes, everything points that way so far," he was assured; "but no more talkie at present, Perk—we'll keep bottled up until inside four walls, where no spy can steal our thunder. Slim's knocked the underpinning away from a bunch of fine schemes looking to his undoing, simply by finding out what the big game happened to be, and then bursting the bubble by a scoop. We don't intend to dish our business that way if it can be helped.

"Wall," drawled Perk, with his best Yankee effect, "guess not if we know our stuff, an' c'n roll our hoop."

As they walked along toward their hotel Perk

kept up a constant lookout, as though endeavoring to make some more or less thrilling discovery—never a man, black or white, did they meet but that he was made the object of a severe scrutiny by the suspicious one; however, they reached their objective without his having run across any reason for making a decision; and shortly afterwards they were securely lodged in their room, the door locked, and a couple of easy chairs inviting them to take things comfortable, which they lost no time in doing, being wearied from so much trotting about—flying men as a rule not enjoying a reputation for pedestrian feats.

A long and serious confab followed, both speaking in low tones; Jack on his part explained the mass of information he had accumulated, and answered the flood of questions asked by his comrade, as well as he was able; until he found a chance to go deeper into things himself he could not make definite statements concerning a number of points that were a bit hazy, and needed confirmation.

Thus the afternoon waned, and the time came when they were ready to think of the essential "eats". Of course it was Perk who brought this subject up, for he chanced to have a tremendous appetite, and was apt to give considerable time to figuring what his next *menu* would be—in-

deed, half the enjoyment in his estimation lay in thus building air castles along the line of "grub".

Remembering that little episode up in Atlanta, where some unknown party had made such a "rat's nest" of Scotty's adjoining room, evidently under a mistaken belief it belonged to himself and Perk, Jack made sure to carry all his important papers on his person, properly secured, so that no deft hand of a sneak thief could negotiate their abstraction.

"All ready, partner," he told Perk, at the time looking out of the window, holding back the curtains to see the better who chanced to be walking along the opposite pavement.

"You never said sweeter words than them, old boy; I sure was close to faintin', my tummy feelin' like the bottom was adroppin' out—soup an' such soft stuffs, while fillin' at the time don't stay with me any great while—I crave solids mostly. On your way then, Jack!"

Jack had marshalled all the facts that had been placed in his possession, weeded a few out as worthless, and by the time their discussion ended had told his companion that the Finger of Destiny was pointing out their future course as lying over the almost boundless plains of Texas, across New Mexico, and deep into Arizona deserts, to the wild country along the bor-

der not far distant from the spot at which the Gila river forms a junction with the larger Colorado; where the latter serves as a watery boundary line between Arizona and Southeastern California, with Old Mexico less than thirty miles distant as the crow flies.

It would be a big jump for them, but the flood of bad currency undoubtedly had its start somewhere in this hostile region, and spread out like an open fan, northwest into San Diego and Los Angeles—northward up to Salt Lake City—and in the northeast as far as Oklahoma. To effectually break it up it was necessary that they go to the fountain head, so as to destroy the very roots of the noisome poison ivy plant.

They spent more than half an hour dining, and needless to say Perk enjoyed himself to his heart's content—who wouldn't if he had a pocketfull of ready cash, furnished by a bountiful Uncle Sam; a bill of fare bristling with all kinds of tempting dishes such as Perk doted on; and to complete the combination having been born with a healthy, unbridled appetite?

It was just commencing to get dusk when they emerged from the restaurant and started back to the hotel, some two blocks distant. Perk, as usual, kept turning his head this way and that very much like a wolf scalp-hunter looking for his suspicious quarry. Presently he picked at

Jack's sleeve, and bending his head until his lips almost touched the other's ear he observed in a sibilant whisper!

"Listen, partner—we got a clam doggin' us like a bloodhound on the track o' a runaway nigger from a convict camp back in Alabam—get that, do you?"

CHAPTER XI

THE NIGHT ALARM

"I'm not thrilled by what you say, Perk, because I've been more than half expecting to hear that discovery. Glad you got on to him okay; because it's always best to know what's in the wind. What sort of a chap is he like?"

Jack spoke in his usual calm way, and the other realized he had undoubtedly been prepared for the sudden news.

"Nothin' out o' the way 'bout his looks, far as I c'n see," was Perk's reply; "on'y got a few squints at the guy; but he's keepin' tab o' our movements I guess now."

"Reckon he might be one of those lads in the Ryan ship that crashed in flames after they'd flown the coop?" asked Jack.

"Huh! just can't be dead sure, partner," chuckled Perk; "but there's somethin' 'bout his walk that gets me into believin' he's the *kiwi* that pilot was keepin' on our tail so long, stickin' like a leech from a mud-hole."

"I wonder," the other went on to say, as if talking to himself; "if that's the case then, both

those duffers pulled through with their lives, and not so badly hurt. Honestly I'm a bit glad that's so, for up to the present I've never had occasion to take a human life."

Perk snorted on hearing this.

"Well, if so be you'd been ten years older, my boy, mebbe you'd not be able to say that—chances are you'd a been mixed up in that mess across the Atlantic, when Yanks an' Johnny Rebs were fightin' shoulder to shoulder, and it was a case o' a Heine pilot's life or our'n. But if you keep on with Uncle Sam's service as you're adoin' right now, the time'll come for you to fetch back a dead man who jest *wouldn't* let hisself be captured."

"Like as not," remarked Jack; "but there's no need of crossing a river till you come to it; so I'm not taking trouble by the forelock away ahead of time."

"What'll we do 'bout this dickey bird that's bobbin' at our heels so gaily, tell me, partner?" pursued Perk, eagerly, as though in his fighting heart he was actually hoping his superior would give the order to turn on their persistent pursuer, and at least blacken both his eyes.

"Oh! nothing at all, Perk; let him run his rope; only we'll keep along streets where there's plenty of company, and be prepared for any sort of ambush; though I can't believe he'd be crazy

enough to start anything so early in the evening—if the hour was close to midnight, things might be different. There are any number of tough cases in this old Creole city ready to handle a sticking game for the coin in it—blacks and yellows and whites it doesn't matter which—all of them are assassins at heart."

"Then you don't care if he shadows us straight to the hotel?" demanded Perk.

"Much good that will do him." said Jack with a light laugh; "the chances are two to one he already knows where we've put up, and has had some spy dog me to the Federal building. When the time comes for us to jump off we'll find a slick way to hop our ship without giving these boys a show-down."

Presently they arrived at the hotel entrance, without any untoward incident arising to mar the quiet of the evening. Perk cast a parting glance toward their rear just before entering, and seeing the shadowy figure hovering not far away, considered it a part of his duty to place his thumb to his nose, and wiggle his fingers derisively, at the same time uttering a snarl like a bobcat at bay, to express his utter contempt.

Once in their room, Jack first of all cast about as if to decide whether any uninvited guest had intruded on their preserves while they were absent.

"Everything seems to be just as we left it," he told his running mate, after making this little survey, "and even if some busybody did get in here with the aid of a pass-key borrowed from a chambermaid, he was shrewd enough not to mess things up like they did with our friend Scotty of the air mail bunch."

"I guess now they must acome to the conclusion you keep the letter o' instructions 'bout your person," suggested Perk, wisely, "which, bein' the case mebbe now they figger on sneakin' in here while we're sound asleep, an' agoin' through your clothes in regulation style. They do tell me there be sneak thieves right clever in this same burgh, equal to the ones out in India, where they c'n steal the sheet from under a sleeper, without wakin' him up."

"I understand that's really true, partner," Jack agreed; "but we're not going to let them have half a chance, even if they hired all the crooks in New Orleans to play the game."

"Sounds good to me, boss," Perk declared. "We'll manage to sleep with one eye open, an' if any critter tries to give us the once over, he'll wish he'd never been born, that's all I know."

Before turning in, Jack placed a chair so nicely balanced that in case of the door being ever so slightly opened it would crash to the floor, making enough noise to arouse the Seven Sleepers.

Perk grinned at seeing him prepare this "guardian angel" as he termed it, and lost no time himself in "hitting the hay."

Some time later in the night, when outside noises had almost died away, there came a loud clatter that awoke both the sleepers instantly. They bounced out on the floor in their pajamas, with Jack pulling the cord he had attached to the electric bulb, so that the room was magically illuminated.

The chair lay on its side, and just beyond Perk could see that their door was partly open; the key had been left in the lock, but skillful fingers must have manipulated it by means of slender-jawed pliers, showing the touch of a professional thief.

Straight toward the door the form of Perk was projected — a hungry lion could hardly have made a more pronounced leap at some four-legged game which he had been stalking.

Tearing open the door still wider, Perk thrust out his head, and looked up and down the hotel corridor. He fancied he could make out a dim figure far along the poorly lighted hall, but it vanished like a phantom even as he stared, evidently turning some corner.

But there were other sounds arising — doors all along the corridor were opening, and heads being projected, showing how the startling alarm

had awakened numerous other sleepers, who may have imagined an earthquake was in process of occurring, though such a happening was utterly foreign to the metropolis on the Lower Mississippi.

Voices, too, were heard, from both masculine as well as feminine sources, as the aroused hotel guests endeavored to fathom the real meaning of the row.

Perk, seeing there was nothing doing, closed the door, and locked it again; after which he turned to his companion who had been watching his actions with more or less amusement.

"Consarn his picture," growled the old fighter; "he got off scot free; I jest glimpsed him aturnin' the first bend down the hall. Blamed shame I couldn't come to grips with the yeller cub — I'd a given a heap to twist his neck some, you bet I would. Mebbe now I'd otter sit up the rest o' the night to make certain, eh, boss?"

"Not the slightest need of such a thing, partner," Jack assured him. "I'll fix that door so it won't be opened again in a hurry."

With that he again took the stout chair, and placed it diagonally against the door, so that its top rested just under the knob; after that had been accomplished it must needs be a battering-ram that could burst in on them.

Not content with that, Jack went to each of the two windows, thrust out his head to examine for the second time the face of the outer wall of the building so as to make sure there was no ledge wide enough to give a would-be trespasser foothold.

"Not the ghost of a chance for the most nimble thief to get in by way of a window, Perk, so back to bed we go, and sleep like babes in the wood for we're in the third story and far enough from a fire escape to be secure."

Perk grinned and nodded acquiescence; truth to tell he was not at all averse to starting all over again—possibly the rude interruption had disturbed him just when he was starting to partake of a royal feast that covered every one of his most beloved dishes and he was hugging the delusion to his heart that if given another chance history might repeat itself.

At least there was no further alarm, and the night passed into oblivion like all its countless predecessors with the rising sun arousing the two comrades, and Perk as usual singing out that he felt as though he could easily manage two customary breakfasts in that delighful restaurant where they were already feeling so much at home.

CHAPTER XII

PLAYING WITH FIRE

During the morning Jack took a taxi and paid another visit to the offices in the government building where Mr. Adkins had his desk, doing his daily stunt under the direction of the U. S. District Attorney and other officials in the service of Uncle Sam.

Perk, also, had his job laid out for him, which was to circulate around until he felt positive he had thrown off any possible spy after which it was his duty to make certain purchases, following the list Jack had given him, have them all sent to the aviation field in charge of the man Mr. Adkins had placed on guard at the hangar containing their ship and thus completing the stock of supplies necessary for their long flight and survey work.

Perk carried out his instructions to the letter, and with great vim, since the fact of their laying in these stores was a positive indication that things were coming to pass insuring a speedy getaway and *Action* was what had come to be the greatest asset in life to Perk.

They met again at noon in their eating place, where, choosing an isolated corner table they could discuss their plan of campaign, even while attending to the wants of the inner man.

Perk made his report, which the other seemed to find good, judging from his frequent nods of acquiescence and when the story had been told to the last word, Perk felt it was his turn to learn things.

"I guess now you got the last batch o' information from His Nibs, Jack?" he hastened to ask, expectantly.

"I sure did, partner," he was told. "A few scraps of fresh news that'd be likely to interest us had drifted in since I saw Mr. Adkins last, which he passed along to me. I'll sort these shreds over later, and fix them where they belong. So far as I can see now they corroborate what we've already been so strongly believing must be a fact."

"Which means, I guess, boss, we head west?" ventured Perk, eagerly.

"Into the setting sun—that's right, Perk."

"Do we still expect to keep in touch with Mr. Adkins, Jack?"

"Whenever the chance opens up, and we have any important news to send along or want to know certain things, perhaps even to call on him for that bunch of old-time Texas Rangers he

said he could turn over to us if we found any use for them."

"Glory be!" said Perk, plainly excited, "I sure do hope that emergency does bob up, 'cause I'd give my last Mex dollar to glimpse them rearin', tearin' ole fighters knockin' spots outen the bunch o 'lawless ringers Slippery Slim's gathered around him. Chances are they'd skip out like hot fleas soon as they heard the ol'time battle cry o' the defenders o' the Rio Grande in the days when cattle rustlers raided the ranches down Texas way."

"But we've got to remember," cautioned Jack, "that these chaps are like lean hungry wolves, that never leave the trail of a wounded stag as long as they can crawl along. I'm not fancying we've pulled the wool over their eyes so far and that fact was brought to my attention just after I got back from conferring with Mr. Adkins."

"As how, boss?" queried the curious Perk.

"I don't just know what influenced me after I'd entered the hotel, to step back and look out again," explained Jack. "There was the driver of my taxi, the trusty who'd been recommended by the clerk at the desk, talking earnestly with an unknown party and even as I watched I saw him thrust a bank note into the chauffeur's itch-

ing hand, showing that he has been corrupted and is in cohoot with our enemies."

"Shucks! is it so rotten bad as all that, partner?" bleated the disgusted Perk. "All I c'n say is I sure do hope it was a nice brand new five-dollar bill he handed over to the yeller dog, an' that it's agoin' to turn out to be a sample o' their bogus money outfit. Serve the slick renegade if he got hisself pulled in for passin' a counterfeit note on some guy that ain't goin' to sit by and take what's comin' to him without raisin' a nice howl."

"Don't be too vindictive, Perk," Jack told him.

"Say, partner, ever see the boob afore?" the other demanded.

"If you mean the chap who was pumping my driver for all that was out, Perk, I can't say that I have. He was a flashily dressed man, with loud clothes that would stamp him as a gambler, like those who used to travel on these Mississippi River steamboats in the old days before the Civil War, fleecing unsuspecting passengers out of all their money and I haven't the least doubt but what he's a member of the very gang we're expecting to round up. Mr. Adkins told me it was simply amazing the vastness of the combine Slippery Slim's managed to gather around him but he was certain it must

number many scores of workers, all obeying the orders of the mainspring—crooked Slim Garrabrant."

"Huh! the more you keep on tellin' me them big stories, Jack, the happier it all makes me 'cause I seem to just know there's bound to be a heap o' rough house stuff croppin' up, to cool my blood, ragin' hot just now."

"Some fine day you'll be rubbing up against enough fighting to make you call quits with the game, Perk, my boy; and it's just likely to crop up before long if indications count for anything. I felt pretty sure from his swagger that this fellow might be the very same master mind in charge of that Ryan boat—then, too, when he walked away he had a little limp, which might have come from striking the ground so hard after his chute let him down."

"Darned pity he didn't break a leg, or even his measly ol' neck, I'd say," grumbled Perk, one of his fits of resentment gripping him just then. "Got no use for these treacherous snakes that squirm, and worm their way into the confidence o' honest gents, on'y to play a low-down trick, an' fill their pockets with smackers."

"There's one thing we've got to guard against," suggested Jack, who seemed to have a faculty for looking at every side of a picture,

and anticipating troubles that might never have occurred to others less gifted.

"As what, partner?" asked Perk, brightening up once more.

"Delay is what they may be hoping for—some way to hold us here while important news is carried to headquarters. I can even see how they might make some sort of ridiculous charge against us to the police, in hopes we would be held several days under suspicion."

Perk looked astonished.

"But see here, boss, we got our credentials from Washington to prove we're in the Secret Service, an' sky detectives at that; they jest wouldn't dare hold us on some sorter flimsy charge 'cause that'd get 'em in hard with the Government, wouldn't it?"

"You never know how these affairs may turn out," said Jack. "Often there seems to be some kind of a jealous feeling between States officers and those of the Government—almost like a little vendetta, each arm of the Law striking out at the other, and getting in a sly lick that's good for a laugh after hostilities have died down. These Southern city police might make out there was a grave charge of abduction or something like that, compelling them to hold us *incommunicado*—that is keep us from intercourse with the U. S. District Attorney's office until

several days had elapsed and then setting us free with a lot of apologies that didn't mean anything whatsoever."

"Yeah! I get your drift partner," said Perk, frowning. "We sure can't afford to spend any of our valuable time in the hoosgow here, if we c'n help it. 'Cause things set that way I hope you get busy an' fix it so we'll shake the dust o' this same burgh off our shoes in a hurry. Got the date settled yet, Jack?"

"I shook hands with, and said goodbye to Mr. Adkins this morning, Perk and you are at liberty to figure that out as you please."

"Then it's *tonight?*" asked the other, looking well satisfied with such an enticing programme.

"Wind and weather permitting we'll clear out soon after twilight settles down on the city and the river," Jack assured his understudy.

"Me, I'm sittin' pretty, an' taking things as they come along, old hoss," continued Perk. "Let's perambulate and attend to the crying needs of this high noon hour—the girl told me they expected to have apple dumplings for lunch today an' that's one I'd nominate as bein' among my prime favorites—you know I got a *few* I really enjoy an' that's no lie either."

"Yes, I know a good many on your list—fact is," said frank Jack, "if I ran down the whole menu this noon there'd be only a scant few that's

missed being called your especial favorites each in its turn as the wind blew. But just as well we did all the eating while the chance lasts, for only a magician can tell what our bill of fare is going to be during the coming week or two—some weird dishes most likely — boiled owl, fried rattlesnake, baked prairie dog — Heaven knows to what ends we may be reduced."

"Have a heart, partner, don't take my healthy appetite away by mentionin' them terrible dishes. 'Member you promised we'd hire a taxi after lunch, an' drive all around the city, lampin' the big sights like the French market, the queer buryin' places where holes in thick walls take the place o' graves, on 'count o' there bein' so much water in the ground, with the city settin' so low down, an' the ol' Mississippi on one o' its benders. Then I want to eat Gulf oysters an' shrimp at one o' them cute little stands we noticed yesterday afternoon; try a reg'lar Creole dinner tonight at that place Mr. Adkins told us about—after which I'm all done with Orleans, an' ready to pull up stakes for keeps."

"We'll keep that to the last, Perk, and go to the flying field from the eating house by taxi. From that time on we'll have to depend on our own heads and hands to keep us out of difficulties. But let's hope we can climb up to a three thousand foot ceiling, and strike out as if we

were aiming for Savannah or Jacksonville, only to swing around inside of half an hour, climb high over the city and river and put for the Texas border at full speed."

This enchanting program gave Perk much cause for rejoicing and he sat down at their regular table in the restaurant feeling, as he expressed it, "happy as a clam at high tide." and full of little laughs that seemed to gurgle up from his shoes.

They chatted of other happenings, not wishing to "talk shop" in such a crowded place, lest listening ears pick up certain information that could be used greatly to their disadvantage—Perk had an endless fund of interesting reminiscences that, told in his inimitable fashion, were a never failing source of joy to the appreciative air pilot.

The afternoon was spent in motoring all around the most interesting portions of the city, the obliging Mr. Adkins having made out a list of subjects they should not miss seeing while on this first visit to the justly famous Louisiana metropolis.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HOP-OFF

Leaving the hotel, after settling their account, and still making use of the taxi with its accommodating driver, Jack and his comrade had taken what small amount of hand luggage they possessed along with them, not meaning to come back again.

Mr. Adkins had recommended a small but unique restaurant run by a buxom French madame, where they could have a Creole supper, such as would long haunt their memories as a genuine treat and it was to this place they ordered their driver to convey them.

Both of them felt fairly convinced they had been shadowed during the afternoon, although so carefully must this have been accomplished they had no positive proof to make it what Perk would term a "dead certainty."

They really did have a delightful "feed," and the dishes set before them were as a rule complete mysteries although the obliging madame, seeing they were tasting her triumphs of the French *chef's* art for the first time, gladly ex-

plained the nature of the food they consumed with so much gusto.

Perk was fascinated with his supper, and inwardly vowed that this should not be the last time he would partake of tasty Creole dishes. This duty fulfilled, they faced the next progressive step in their night's program—making for the aviation field, and boarding their ship for a speedy takeoff, their ultimate goal neither of them could say just where, save that if all went well they expected to be somewhere along the California border within the next few days.

The taxi was waiting, with the chauffeur on the alert. He had already been advised of the fact that they anticipated having some parties attempt to spy upon them as evening settled down and on this account he had maintained a strict watch for troublesome visitors who might even attempt to threaten him with bodily injury unless he agreed to enter into their plans for delaying the flight of the two flyers, as he knew his passengers to be from what he had been told.

"Well, I see our taxi's still on deck, partner," observed Perk, just as if he might have suspected they would find it missing, with a detail of grim city police waiting to escort them to the lockup, they to be held in durance vile until serious charges against them could be sifted.

"Nothing came along to bother you, Henri?"

asked Jack of the smiling driver, who laughed as he said in reply:

"I haf seen one beeg hulk of ze man hanging around, M'sieu, and looking as if he would like to eat me up but me, I haf been an old soldier in the Grand Army of France, and I think he did not like the way I throw my chest out thees way, and walk as eef I am on guard duty; he did not address a single word to me, but just a little while ago he disappear — I think he may haf gone to get more courage out of ze glass."

"Good boy, Henri," said the grinning Perk, clapping a hand on the stalwart chauffeur's shoulder; "for myself I should not like to tackle you when you have your fighting face all set. Let's go."

So they were off, and heading out in the direction of the aviation grounds, with the first shadows of approaching evening gathering around them. Perk may have been more or less nervous, in anticipation of something coming to pass that would seriously cripple their plans for a speedy flight, since he kept turning his head from side to side and scrutinizing every one they saw upon the streets they traversed.

Henri maintained a fairly good speed, all the law would permit, so that few cars passed them on the road. Perk managed to watch closely, and never a motor came booming along in their

wake, honking to announce the driver's intention to pass by, than he had his eyes glued on the car and continued to pay strict attention until it had crept well up ahead.

But after all nothing out of the way came to pass, and eventually they reached the aviation field where they found lights already in play, since a delayed air mail ship was hovering over signaling for better illumination. There was some small damage in regard to the steering gear, making it a bit risky to try a landing unless the field was brilliantly lighted.

"You made an arrangement with a couple of the ground force to hang around so as to help us get the crate out okay, didn't you, Perk?" queried Jack, as they drew up close to the particular hangar where they had seen their plane placed in quarters.

"Yeah, I sure did, Jack," the other replied. "Must be they're over where that crate hanging overhead means to land—somethin' wrong mebbe but they gimme their word to stay around till we got here — there, I c'n lamp the guys runnin' thisaways right now, so it's okay, partner."

"Yes, I see them coming," returned the other, himself a bit relieved, since the intended departure was a most important episode in their plans,

and to meet with any sort of a setback would be most aggravating indeed.

The two mechanicians quickly arrived, the hanger was unlocked and opened so as to permit the exit of the ship. First of all both flyers hastened to don their working togs, then fasten on the 'chutes with the harness necessary for the purpose, all working smoothly and finally clapping their helmets on their heads, with the ear-flaps secured to keep things in readiness for any emergency that might crop up.

This being accomplished, Jack gave the word to have the heavy ship dragged out into the open. He knew that his assistant would have looked after everything essential to their comfort during the coming flight for Perk was one of those dependable fellows who carry out orders with machine-like regularity.

A few parties had hastened up to see what was going on but so far as Perk could tell they were either workers connected with the field, or else visitors from the city, who had lingered to watch the landing of the air mail, so as to tell how it was done when they reached their several homes, to partake of a late supper.

Now the ship had been swung around so as to head into the west, since the soft evening breeze was coming from that quarter and everything seemed in readiness for the take-off.

Perk, still surveying his surroundings as if still cherishing a fragment of his former suspicions that all might not be as lovely as surface indications would announce, started to climb aboard. Jack on his part was handing some money to the two men, not wishing to leave a single thing unpaid when passing out from New Orleans—there was nothing to be done about their use of the hangar, since Mr. Adkins had assured him that matter had already been taken care of, regardless of how long they chose to linger in the Crescent City.

Jack, too, cast a last glance around, just as he would have done had he still been with the air mail service and about to start off on his customary night flight with the north-bound sacks of letters and the express matter that went along.

Just then he heard Perk give vent to a hurried exclamation:

"Get aboard, partner; I guess the measly critters are acomin' down on us like hot cakes right now. Lookit how they start arunnin' thisaway, will you?"

Jack did not bother looking, as every second might be valuable; he climbed aboard with alacrity, and settled down in his seat; at the same time calling out to the helpers to stand aside. Then he pulled the gun, with the motor responding

instantly, so well had Perk done his work when checking up the ship that morning.

Perk was still glueing his eyes on the several figures now racing madly in their general direction, and waving their arms wildly; no doubt they had started to shout in addition, but the descending air mail crate was making more or less racket, which, added to by their own motor's thunder, prevented any one from hearing what they may have been whooping.

Perk was trembling with an excess of emotion—evidently they had just escaped "by the skin of their teeth," for he felt certain he could distinguish the uniforms of the police in the little bunch of runners.

"Played your hand just a mite too late, gents!" Perk was whooping as he in turn waved a mocking adieu backward; "thought you'd ketch a weasel asleep, I guess, but not so easy, you gate crashers. Wow! here we go spinnin' along like the wind, and it's goodnight to the bunch. Huh! shootin' at us, air you—jest awastin' ammunition, that's all, boys. Go 'way back an' sit down."

Then Jack lifted her in an upward fling, and they were off like a startled hawk!

CHAPTER XIV

SKIRTING THE GULF

There was some shooting going on back there, for although of course the watchful Perk failed to catch the sound of discharges of guns, he did see flash after flash, proclaiming that the police, under the impression that important criminals were beating them to it, wished to show their warlike spirit by such a bombardment.

If the flying missiles came anywhere near the ascending plane that fact was not manifest to the two occupants of the cockpit; their movements must have been too speedy for such an attack to be successful and almost immediately they had risen beyond the danger line.

Perk was feeling vastly relieved, for it would have been a bad beginning of their special mission were they detained for days in the Southern city, while the agents of the great counterfeit league held the upper hand.

He could see with the last glimpse he had of the aviation field that all this lively accompaniment to their take-off had created considerable excitement—people were running back and

forth, like milling cattle when stampeded in a furious thunder storm and Perk even fancied there was some sort of a movement as though a ship would be sent after them in pursuit.

That troubled him not a bit, because already they were leaving the field far in their wake, and would really be lost in the gathering shadows of coming night before any pursuit plane left the ground.

Besides, had they not already had one experience along those lines, and completely worsted the persistent enemy, sending their boat down in spirals of flames, with the two occupants forced to "bail out" in order to save their lives?

So Perk put that possibility completely out of his mind and busied himself with more practical affairs. First of all he was desirous of communicating with his comrade and to do this they must have those indispensible head-phones clapped to their ears.

He was already applying his own pair with a confidence inspired by frequent applications, after which he managed to get Jack equipped with the other pair.

Steadily they continued to ascend, and swing around until they faced the east, following the plan Jack had outlined to his mate. Not too high did the pilot urge his craft, since such a course was apt to bring them in the sunlight

that still lingered along the upper air lanes.

"Well, they turned out to be a hot bunch all right, partner," was what Perk observed, when he had the harness adjusted and the ear-phone means of communication in shape for use.

"You reckon they must have fetched the police out with them, do you, Perk?" demanded the one at the stick, as he kept an eye on his dials spread across the black dashboard in front of the cockpit.

"Yeah! just what they did, old hoss," returned the other, vehemently, but accompanying his remark with a loud chuckle that told of secret amusement, he being excessively fond of anything that smacked of a joke; "an' they kept up a runnin' fire at us, let me tell you—could see the flashes spittin' like fire crackers on the Fourth o' July."

"All of which sounds like they must have told a pretty wild and woolly yarn to the cops, to make them want us as bad as that, eh, Perk?"

"Makes me think they got an idea this ain't goin' to be just a ordinary man-hunt, but something worth while; we should worry, Jack. Mebbe they a'ready see the handwritin' on the wall, an' mean to try an' upset us in the start, 'fore we get agoin' full tilt. Notice you've gone an' headed east, partner."

"It may fool them; but whether it does or not,

Perk, such a move's our proper caper. When we've gone something like ten or fifteen miles we'll get on the curve, swing around to the south, and then when in sight of the gulf turn due west; after that we'll be on our way to the place where our work is waiting for us."

"Huh! had an idea you'd just climb till out o' sight, an' then cross over the city and river—how 'bout it, Jack?"

"Too much risk to begin with," came the ready reply, showing how Jack always planned ahead; "you know how a rushing boat can be heard clearly even when lost to sight among the clouds. It might be those same smart chaps, backed by the authority of the police, would commandeer a ship, and cruise around over the city, so as to learn if we *did* come back so as to line out into the heart of Texas; to make sure such a give-away of our plans can't upset our calculations we'll cross the delta of the Mississippi close to where it joins its muddy waters with the gulf."

"I get you now, partner, an' let me say I guess that's the safest game we c'n play. Time don't count anything wuth while with us on this trip, but results are what we crave."

"You said it that time, boy, the Big Boss has confidence in our being able to fetch home the bacon, and we're bound to prove he didn't make any mistake in putting us on the job."

All this time they continued to zoom along like a frightened wild duck, and it was not long before Jack was turning the nose of his ship toward the south. The night had not as yet settled down over the earth, although they were holding an altitude of several thousand feet and by straining his eyes a bit Perk was able to distinguish objects far below—he could tell when they passed over a large sheet of water, probably Lake Ponchatrain, with narrower cuts winding through vast marshes, and seas of waving reeds; also begin to catch fugitive glimpses of the still distant Mexican Gulf stretching away to the mysterious south.

This was all deeply interesting to Perk, always on the lookout for fresh and novel scenes; for as it happened, thus far in all his wanderings he had really never looked upon that historical sheet of salt water; although reading many a rattling romance of the days when buccaneers and pirates haunted the sub-tropical waters of that same gulf, lying in wait for the Spanish galleons laden with gold bars taken from the prodigally rich mines of Mexico and Central America.

In Perk's mind those historical personages, like Blackbeard, and his fellow rovers of the Black Flag, lent a glamour to the great body of water that was apt to thrill him through and through whenever he allowed his gaze to fall

upon its restless surface, and dark secrets of the past ages.

Shortly afterwards their course was again altered, with the ship swinging into the west. It would seem to have been something like extreme caution on Jack's part but from all accounts, as well as from their own experience with the desperate gang that had given Uncle Sam so much trouble, the scoundrels had a tremendous game at stage, and were ready to go to any lengths to protect the profitable conspiracy from being smashed.

"Safety before speed" had always been Jack's slogan, which could be accounted one of the leading reasons for the success that had come to him in the various vocations he had followed—as a county fair barn-stormer, then in the regular air mail service, and now finally with the celebrated Secret Service arm of the Government, entrusted with one of the most abnormal duties ever given out to its members.

It was not too dark for Perk to know when they were passing over the several outlets to the mighty river; indeed, he was even able to distinguish an ocean going steamship heading up toward the city of New Orleans; for its lights were plainly in evidence and those who chanced to be on deck could probably catch the throb of their motor, since the air was unusually still,

allowing sounds to be heard at great distances, especially when in the air.

Then finally they left the water behind, and found themselves passing over great stretches of sugarcane, and bamboo thickets, with cabins of the humble blacks in little hamlets, sometimes villages of the lowlands, where, as Perk plainly recollected, recent terrible floods had wrought such damage.

So the night wore on, and thus far nothing had occurred to cause them the slightest worry. If their cunning enemies suspected them of planning to go west, and baiting the chief in his lair, there was nothing as yet to show that they were making arrangements to intercept the air adventurers on their way.

An hour—two of them passed, and still they kept making rapid progress. The moon was long above the eastern horizon, although occasionally obscured by passing clouds but Perk told himself it was a pretty fair night, all things considered, and that he had "no kick coming."

CHAPTER XV

PERK AS A FIRE-FIGHTER

It was not far from midnight.

Perk had insisted on taking over the controls, so that Jack might secure a little rest, possibly even pick up a few catnaps in addition. They were at a low altitude, perhaps not more than a thousand feet up, since the air was a bit cool higher and it was certain they stood in no danger from colliding with mountain peaks while crossing the wide State of Texas, where nothing save the level plains lay beneath.

Perk was alive to his duties, but this did not keep him from occasionally stretching his neck, so as to look over the coaming of the cockpit, and trying to make out objects that might be dimly detected on the seemingly limitless plain below.

As a rule next to nothing worth while rewarded these efforts and really he continued doing his little stunt from sheer habit, but there did come a time when he showed sudden interest, and even half arose from his seat to stare with increasing intensity.

Not only that but he immediately banked, to start circling around a certain point. A minute afterwards Perk reached out and shook Jack gently by the shoulder. The ear-phones being still affixed to their heads, Jack naturally desired to know what was up, and did his pal wish to give over the stick to him.

"Nothin' doing, partner," he was told with emphasis; "but there's somethin' queer goin' on down yonder, and I've swung around so's to give it the once over. On your right, Jack, an' there, see how it sparks up again, will you?"

"I'd say it looks like a fire," ventured Jack, after taking a good look.

"My idea to a fraction, boss!" snapped the deeply interested Perk.

"Seems like it might be breaking out through the roof of some sort of cabin, or ranch house," further suggested Jack, himself now almost as excited as his running mate.

"You said it, boy!" declared Perk; "but somehow I don't lamp anybody kickin' around in a big fuss, 'cause o' the shack bein' ablaze; strikes me either nobody ain't to home or else they're so sound asleep they don't know what's goin' on. Glory be! if that's the case, partner, they stand a mighty good chance o' bein' burnt to death in their beds. What ought we do 'bout it, Jack?"

"First place we've just got to rouse 'em up,

and the way to do that is to rush our engine to the limit, so's to make a big row—if that doesn't wake anybody it'll only mean they're away from home—or else already smothered by the smoke."

Perk accordingly started up such a racket that the dreadful roaring noise seemed hoarse enough to awaken the dead and all the while he kept swinging around in a continuous circle.

Jack, bending over the side, watched to see if this had any effect, nor was his discovery long delayed.

"That fetched them, Perk—I can see several moving figures, and they seem to be rushing about with pails in their hands. If the fire hasn't got too strong a start they may be able to throw enough water to put it out."

"Jack, couldn't we do somethin' more to help the poor dicks?" cried Perk, ever ready and willing to assist anybody in trouble, no matter at what cost or personal risk to himself.

"It mightn't be a safe thing to attempt a blind landing," he was told; but something in Jack's voice or manner when he said this encouraged Perk to go a bit further.

"Why, chances are it's as level as a barn floor down there," he hastened to say, eagerly; "here, you could take the stick—there never was a better hand at makin' a three-point landin' than you, partner; me, I might drop a few flares down,

an' that'd give us a squint o' the ground. If we kept to leeward o' the fire there wouldn't be any risk from sparks, don't you see, Jack? I never yet had such a fat chance to be a fire-fighter; let's go, boy—they need all the help they c'n get, I guess."

The temptation was so great it soon overpowered Jack's sense of caution; really he fancied he would never forgive himself if he allowed Perk to show a higher sense of duty to people in distress than he himself could display.

"All right, you win, Perk!" he quickly called out; "hand over the stick, and get those flares ready to drop when I give the word."

Perk started to make a move, showing that he knew just where the objects of his desire were located, for he did not have to leave his seat in order to place his hand upon the small package of flares.

Meanwhile Jack had reduced their speed to a minimum compatible with safety, still continuing that circular movement. The fire had by this time assumed sufficient proportions to dispel any doubts they may have entertained regarding its true nature, for it was burning at a lively rate. Jack could see a crouching figure sprawled on the roof, and apparently emptying bucket after bucket of water on the greedy flames, and passing the empties back down the nearby

ladder to some one standing on an upper rung.

It was all mighty exciting, and to Jack seemed like some sort of fetching picture as shown on the silver screen at the movies—a scene developed through the skill of a wizard director, aided by a group of star actors, so as to bring out all the realistic effects.

"Get ready, Perk!" he told the other suddenly.

"All set, partner," came the inspiring response.

"Let her go, then!" called out the pilot, just as he found himself over a point to leeward of the burning ranch house that he figured would be the best place to make a landing.

Perk had a flare falling almost as the last words left the lips of the pilot and then both of them used their eyes to advantage as it neared the ground, lighting up a small section fairly well—at least what he thus saw seemed to convince Jack it would be fairly safe to attempt a landing, for the ground looked smooth, and free from outbuildings, corrals, or wire fences.

"Drop another, quick as you can!" directed Jack; then, as this was carried out he started down, showing the die was cast, come what would.

Perk threw a third flare to one side, in the hope that its light would afford his pilot a chance to effect one of his really marvelous landings; which turned out to be sound reasoning on his

part—the shock when their landing gear came in contact with the ground was not very severe, and Jack managed so that they did not run more than thirty feet toward the burning house.

Thus far all was well.

Perk was out of the cockpit like a flash, but managed to hold his eager spirit in check long enough to allow his comrade to join him. Then they hurried over to the building, which they could now see, thanks to both the moonlight and the brilliance of the blaze, must be some kind of a ranch house.

Several men who had the appearance of cow punchers were working for all they were worth, fetching water from a well, and hurling it where it was calculated to do the most good.

"Let's give you a hand in that game, neighbors!" Jack burst out with, as he joined the string, backed by Perk, and commenced handling buckets full and buckets empty, with as much vim as though tested and tried members of a village fire company.

At such a time the addition of two more willing workers can do considerable toward smothering a fire, especially when there happens to be no wind moving; and from the moment of their arrival things began to take on a better look as though up to then the fight had been hovering "on the fence," as Perk called it, and

the balance being overturned, victory was in sight.

Perk was in his glory, and the brisk way in which he hurried those buckets along was worth going a long way to witness; Jack never would forget how proud he felt over the marvelous performance of his running mate, and how those encouraging cries, so constantly emitted by Perk, seemed to enthuse everybody with fresh vim and go.

Finally the last spark was extinguished, and the house saved, having suffered but scant damage. Then the men, yes, and women too, gathered around the pair of aviators who had come on the scene just in the nick of time, to first of all arouse the people of the prairie ranch to a sense of the danger that hovered over their heads, and finally take chances in effecting what might have been a rough landing, so as to lend their material aid to the fire fighters.

"Surely you will not think of starting off again till break of day," the big man with the white head of hair, evidently the rancher himself, was saying, while engaged in pumping the hands of the two who had dropped down from the sky, as it were, to bring warning of the burning roof, and start the stiff fight against the greedy flames that had ended so successfully. "Stay and eat breakfast with us, strangers; we'd like to know

you both some better, and have a chance to thank you most heartily."

"Unfortunately we must be on our way, neighbor," Jack told him. "It happens we are on special duty, and delay might upset certain plans we are bent on following out. It was just by sheer accident we discovered the fire, and took the customary means for attracting attention that all air pilots employ; but some other day, if we chance to be in this neighborhood, we'd be pleased to see more of you all."

The women added their voices to the pressing invitation, but Jack was forced to decline, although doing so smilingly, since he would have liked very much to see more of these warm-hearted stockmen and their wild riders, possibly picking up some useful knowledge concerning the way a ranch is run in these modern days, so different from early times in the cattle country.

"It is absolutely necessary for us to be going," Jack told them all, if we are lucky enough to be able to hop-off again. Perk, I wish you'd take a look over toward the west, and see if the ground is fairly clear; while I talk for a few more minutes with our new friends here."

He was astute enough to avoid giving their names to any one but the ranchman, who readily promised not to mention them to a living soul; he felt heavily indebted to Jack and his chum,

and considered that they knew their business best—for one thing he felt absolutely certain the fact of their being in such a hurry had nothing whatever to do with any unlawful act on their part — he had as much confidence in them as though Jack had actually confided the fact of their being Government Secret Service agents, bound on a mission fraught with much peril to life and limb, the prime object of which was to save honest people from being victimized by a gang of unprincipled sharks, makers of clever bank notes that were without the pale of the law and only base counterfeits, although clever imitations of the genuine bills.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE GRIP OF THE STORM

Perk soon afterwards showed up, and seemed so cheerful that it was evident his little scouting mission had yielded favorable results.

"Seems okay to me, partner!" he burst out with, as soon a she came along; "course it ain't just as smooth as some fields we know but there ain't goin' to be any smart trouble takin' off, I guess now."

"And are we holding the nose of the ship straight in line of the course you took a squint at, Perk?" Jack asked, as he prepared to climb into his seat, the people of the ranch clustering around, to gaze with wide open eyes at the fleet aircraft, some of them doubtless seeing such a modern cloud clipper for the first time.

"Dead ahead, boss, an' you'll strike the right racket, I'm tellin' you," came the positive assurance:

"Then jump aboard, comrade, and we'll put it to the test," saying which Jack himself climbed into the waiting cockpit, to settle down in his accustomed seat, take a quick glance at his dials

when the small light was turned on, and await a signal from the other sky traveler that he was "fixed."

The way was clear, and the fact that just then the gay old moon condescended to poke her smiling face out from behind a mass of clouds assisted more or less in giving the pilot some of the necessary illumination—the rest must be left to his native sagacity and instinct.

There was a bunch of cottonwoods at some little distance ahead, the location of which Perk had pointed out to his mate before settling down in his seat but if all went well Jack calculated to be able to clear them in good shape—did it seem necessary he could swerve slightly to the right, and have a clear field for the take-off.

There was a little shouting as the friendly plane started to taxi along, but of course this was smothered by the increasing roar of exhaust and spinning propeller. Faster and faster they scurried onward, and then started to rise on an angle just sufficient to nicely clear the tops of the cottonwoods; when Jack jazzed his motor, to find it running as "sweet as a purring cat."

So they departed only a short time after making that landing which humanity had demanded and in times to come the little episode was likely to afford both aviators more or less satisfaction, in that they had "seen their duty and

done it," as Perk would say in his whimsical way.

As they continued on their way Perk found himself wondering if this interesting adventure was destined to be a sample of other equally thrilling happenings in store for them the further they dipped into the great game that had been laid at their door by the powers that be at Washington.

Whenever he came to thinking of the audacity shown by Slippery Slim in virtually defying all the authority of the Government, Perk would feel his dander rising as if in great indignation.

"Huh!" he at one time told himself, being rather fond of thus communing, as his thoughts ran on, "we'll call *his* bluff just the same, the scaly ol' gila monster, you wait an' see. Thinks he's the whole works, the boss man-handler, does he, just 'cause he's outguessed a number o' the boys. This time he's due to find himself up against guys o' the right size, who'll jerk him down off'n his high perch in a jiffy, or I miss my ticket."

So Perk kept on boasting in his customary fashion, possibly to keep his mind on the subject. Jack was paying little attention to side issues just then for he knew his pal's peculiarities, and short-comings as well and having "exhausted

his boiler" Perk presently lapsed into utter silence.

They had climbed to a fairly high ceiling, and caught only occasional fugitive glimpses of the earth far below, when the moon chanced to break through the banks of clouds, which intervals became less and less frequent, Jack noticed.

He did not altogether fancy the looks of the heavens, by degrees becoming more and more overcast; still, this might after all mean next to nothing and their business was to keep steadily on their way as if things were bound to come out all right.

It was now drawing well on toward midnight, and they had placed hundreds of miles between the city of their recent stay and themselves. Long since Perk had taken what proved to be his last glimpse of the vast gulf as seen far away toward the south, when the night was brightly illuminated, with the moon's silvery rays shining on the glistening waters, and making a picture that even appealed to Perk's rugged nature—after that all he was able to make out was the monotonous level plains that lay in every quarter, as though the whole earth consisted of this same stock country.

No longer were they able to find any cheer in the company of the moon, for the canopy above, earlier in the night peopled by a multitude of

bright stars, was now gripped in dense masses of clouds.

Having thus lost his guide marks below, Jack was compelled to place all dependence upon his faithful instruments, but this of course was an old story to one of his experience, so that he did not do any worrying on that score.

Perk, buried in his own thoughts, and paying scant heed to what changes were taking place in the signs of the weather, had no warning until suddenly there came a dazzling flash, that was almost instantly succeeded by a tremendous burst of thunder.

"Ginger pop! that means we're booked for a bit o' storm, mebbe, eh, Jack?" was his startled exclamation.

"Let's hope it turns out to be *only* a bluster," the pilot went on to say, as he turned the nose of his ship upward, and commenced to climb, evidently in hopes that by so doing they might get above those low hanging clouds, and have clear sailing while the disturbance lasted.

When shortly afterwards a second electrical crash almost stunned them by its violence, Perk began to fumble for his oilskin coat, which he was never without when aboard a boat with an open cockpit.

Perk could take a ducking with as much good nature as the next fellow but just the same he

did not intend to get soaked if he could help it, since a continuance of the flight, with a cold wind likely to follow the rain, would not prove to be the most delightful experience possible.

No sooner had he accomplished the job of securing his raincoat than he gave Jack the well known signal that he meant to take over the stick, and thus allow his comrade to also protect himself against bad weather.

Accordingly both of them were presently thus equipped, and ready to take whatever might be in the offing. Meanwhile the ascent was continued in spasms, for there was always a chance of getting above such a storm, and avoiding the worst of it.

The thunder claps became more frequent, and also much louder, so that each sudden burst gave them both a thrill, death seemed so close, for should their speeding ship chance to attract one of those dazzling bolts it would be all over for the daring air adventurers, and no one be the wiser concerning their taking-off, until possibly after long months had passed, their bleached bones might be discovered by some party of plainsmen out looking for rustlers or seeking to round up missing stock.

Thus far not a single drop of rain had fallen, according to Perk's calculations but the coming of the drenching flood could not be much longer

delayed, he felt positive. Had there not been so much racket around them those keen ears of his might have detected a rushing sound in the near distance, like the roar of the incoming tide on the sandy shores of the gulf.

Then it came with a swoop, the wind whistling around their ears and the rain beating a tattoo against the fuselage of the ship, as well as striking them smartly in the face, despite such protection as their helmets and heavy goggles afforded.

Jack certainly had his hands full in managing the bobbing, shifting craft, gripped by those shifty gusts that came with giant force, making the flyers feel as though they were clinging to a mere chip tossed about in the wild fury of a Texas tempest.

Time and again did Perk feel as though his heart had jumped up in his throat, almost choking him; seasoned veteran at this sort of thing as he believed himself to be, he could not help this feeling of helplessness in the hands of the aroused elements; yet each time Jack managed to bring their ship through the teeth of the storm in a way that was next door to miraculous, and if Perk had up to this time not fully appreciated the astonishing skill and confidence of his younger companion while at the controls in an emergency, he certainly was getting his lesson then and there, in a way to cause it to sink deep, and stick.

CHAPTER XVII

A FIGHT WELL WON

It was no longer possible for the busy pilot to keep on his course. Every minute of his time was taken up with a desperate effort to keep from being thrown into a nose dive, that, unless miraculously conquered, would be likely to send them whirling down, to crash from a five thousand foot ceiling, and thus bring about a complete writeoff.

That however was the least of Jack's worries —all he asked was the ability and luck to be able to fend off threatening disaster; could this be done successfully in good time they could pick up all that was lost, and once more continue their westward flight.

The battering they endured was simply tremendous, and Jack marveled at the ship being able to withstand such a horrible strain. If but a single strut gave way under all that pounding it would mean starting a series of similar mishaps such as would quickly render them incapable of keeping aloft; and with this threat hanging over their heads it can readily be un-

derstood neither of the two could be in a comfortable frame of mind.

Still it is wonderful how men thus threatened will continue to carry on, although in an almost mechanical fashion, doing just the necessary thing with each change of pace on the part of the tricky storm, and meeting successfully every near tragedy as it arises to clutch them in its grip.

No longer did Jack keep on climbing—it seemed to him that the further the staggering boat lifted the more dangerous became their situation for the air was surcharged with electricity as the zigzag lightning darted from cloud to cloud, doubling the chances of their frail craft being struck.

In fact it seemed so terrible above that he lacked the nerve to persist in the upward work, and even commenced to drop down. Perk noticing this move, hardly knew what to make of it. He was, as he himself would have expressed it, "hanging on by his teeth," in order to keep his seat in the wildly plunging airship and on finding that the bold pilot had given up hope of finding relief in the upper regions, the fact appalled him. Could it be Jack had decided to attempt a landing, with only the glare of those repeated electrical flashes to serve as airport lights? That indeed would be next to

admitting their case as hopeless, and that Jack was taking such desperate chances only as a last resort.

They were zooming along all this time as if pursued by a jinx and indeed with such weird accompaniments it would not be hard to believe the spirit of the storm took on the part of such a goblin of the air, to pursue relentlessly this bold invader of the home of the aroused elements.

Perk hit the bullseye close to the center when afterwards, in describing their experience on this night of the great blow, he vowed they were "playing dice with death," since it seemed a bare chance that they could ever pull through alive.

Such is the life of the aviator—one hour sailing smoothly along, at peace with all mankind, envying no man his following, and feeling himself to be on the top of the world—the next and he may be fighting with might and main the mad demons of the air, his life hanging in the balance, his strength ebbing fast, and unless the little cherub aloft that is said to be watching over each sailor, whether of the sea or the limitless air, comes to the rescue, his fate is sealed, and another modern Argonaut never comes back again to the home port.

It did not seem to be any the less exciting even when they had succeeded in gaining a much lower altitude; although possibly the danger

from those thunderbolts might have been somewhat abated. Perk soon realized that his pilot had no intention of trying for a landing in the midst of such a turmoil and confusion, which fact relieved his harried feelings to some extent. Indeed, it would have been a mad proceeding, and almost unheard of, since hardly the slightest chance offered for the most skillful pilot to reach the earth without disaster, such as making a ground loop, and having the heavy engine bury them under its weight.

Perk endeavored to convince himself that things were a bit easier since a lower altitude had been effected but in so doing he feared he was only deceiving himself—if anything at all things were even worse,—although the drop might not be so far, which was small comfort, since it must mean their complete annihilation if it befell them.

Perk had numerous spasms when he fancied something was going amiss with their staunch craft, although unable to decide the exact nature of the imaginary trouble. Despite all these chills, which must have been the products of his excitement, they managed to hold out minute after minute, which fact gave more or less cause for renewed hope.

Jack must indeed be almost completely exhausted, and yet he refused to give up the con-

trols, to which his hands seemed glued as though riveted there. Perk punched his side numbers of times, but could get no favorable response, proving that the other deemed it too hazardous a proceeding to change possession of the stick while in the whirl of that shrieking gale—which was indeed only another adaptation of the old proverb "it is folly to change horses when crossing a stream."

There was no means for communication with each other, even though they may have wished to do so, since the ear-phones had been discarded with the donning of their slickers, and could not be put back in position, owing to the sudden bursting of the storm, and the necessity for employing their hands in more useful pursuits.

All Perk could do was to hang on, keeping himself ready to seize hold should his companion be suddenly compelled to release his grip through sheer weariness—that, and keeping tabs of the weather, so as to glean the first favorable sign that came along, promising a let-up, or at least a break.

Judging from the heavy rain that had come down in such a solid stream it must be reckoned one of those dreadful cloud-bursts of which he, Perk, had so often heard, but which thus far in his experience he had never met up with. No

doubt rivers would be out of their beds long before dawn although that angle of the situation did not interest them in the least, since their traveling would not be interfered with a particle, if only the air proved inviting.

Yes, soon Perk believed he could detect a lessening of the baffling crosswinds that had been so trying to the pilot, keeping him continually on the anxious seat—then, too, it struck him the floods were growing weaker in the bargain; which two facts gave poor Perk a feeling akin to joy in the region of his heart, such as he may have known on previous occasions, but that must have been far down in his adventurous past.

According to their altimeter they were something like two thousand feet from the ground, but of course never the faintest glimpse could they secure of what lay beneath them, so poor was the visibility, with all that torrent of water pouring down as might a mountain cataract.

This delightful feeling grew stronger as minutes passed—at this rate he would soon be able to influence tired Jack to renounce his frozen hold on the stick, and turn the handling of the ship over to his chum.

In this frame of mind he again nudged the other, but in turn received a negative shake of the head, which meant there was "nothing doing"—in other words, since the storm still raged,

even though in somewhat diminished violence, they must not be too premature, and spoil it all just when the victory seemed about to drop into their hands.

With what Perk hoped would prove to be a last dying spurt the rain came pelting down, after which it suddenly stopped as though an unseen hand away up among the clouds, had plugged the gap, and kept any more water from running out—enough was enough, surely, Perk was telling himself when he made this thrilling discovery and for one he felt he had had sufficient rain to last him the balance of that year.

So too did the wind start to diminish its force, also coming from one direction with more constancy—some relief to Jack, that was certain, since now he could know just how to steer his turbulent craft so as to meet the force driving against it.

Then what did Perk do but start getting his ear-phones adjusted, being wild to hear a human voice, after all that fiendish roaring and howling kicked up by the raging elements.

Why, already the atmosphere had cleared enough for him to catch faint glimpses of what lay beneath them—it looked as though they had come to a stretch of country where the level prairie had changed into rougher ground, with deep swales, sometimes running into quite re-

spectable ravines and there were indications of ridges ahead, which might even prove to be fairly high, so that it would have been tempting Providence had Jack dropped still lower, while flying blind through all that welter.

"Talk to me 'bout luck," the grateful Perk was saying to himself, "I never ran 'cross anything like *this*—they told me Jack must a been born under a lucky star, an' now I sure b'lieves it to be the right stuff they were givin' me, an' no taffy either. But that was some fight, take it from me, fellers."

Shortly afterwards Jack condescended to give him the sign that he was willing to pass up the job; whereat Perk quickly superseded him as pilot, and saw the other sink back in his cramped quarters as though unable to hold up his tired arms a second longer. Apparently the relief had come not a minute too soon, for he must have been close to the point of utter exhaustion after so long and violent a strain.

Battered as the crate had been while the gale lashed them so madly, it had stood up under the buffeting most amazingly and Perk would never have occasion to utter anything saving words of praise for the model and its makers; it must be as near perfection as aircraft are being built these days of man's victory over the savage forces of the air.

Setting his course in what he believed to be the proper direction Perk waited until Jack seemed fairly well recovered, when he was pleased to see the other take up his head harness as though he too felt the necessity for opening up communications with his running mate, which outlook gratified Perk immensely.

There were many things he wished to have made clear, and besides, he felt more than curious to learn what Jack's next move might turn out to be—that they had drifted far from their original course went without saying but a means must be found to recover the lost ground, after which they could take up the game again just where the sudden storm had caused such a diversion.

And then the moon peeped out through a break in the clouds overhead, as though to tell them it was all over, with decent weather once more in the offing.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DESERTED SHACK

"Well, that's somehow I guess over, and I'm mighty glad," was the way Perk voiced his feelings, when the clouds were rolling away, and the heavenly host of stars backed up the moon in lighting up the firmament.

"Same here," echoed Jack, still more or less tired after his energetic battle with the unleashed elements.

"And strikes me the air's got some chilly," added the other; "I own up I'm shivering to beat the band right now. Where d'ye figger we might be, partner—must a lost our course in all that kettle o' rain an' wind, an' drifted far to the south, eh, what, old hoss?"

"No question about it, Perk; I could feel the pull right along; still, there wasn't a thing to do but let the old crate take the reins in her teeth. Once morning comes we'll manage somehow to get a line on our locality, and swing back to our course."

"Some hours off yet," ventured Perk, whose lips were indeed trembling, as if the chill was

beginning to get in its work—perhaps all that recent excitement was helping to make him shiver, as it often will, even in the case of the most valiant of men.

Jack noticed this fact, even though he himself experienced nothing similar, for some reason or other.

"See here, Perk, you ought to have a chance to sit alongside a warm fire and dry off; the rain must have got under your slicker, and I reckon now you're slopping around in water back there. Something's *got* to be done about it."

"Shucks! boss, don't bother 'bout me; I'm a hard-shell you must know, an' a little dampness ain't agoin' to do me any harm, Jack."

"Jus the same we'll try and make a landing," continued the other, "if there's half a chance; all I'd want would be to stack up against a level stretch of upland, where the drainage had carried off all that flood."

"Yeah, that sounds all to the good, boy but what difference will it make, I want to know? After such a storm it's bound to be some cold even away down here along the Texas-Arizona line; they call them Northers, jest like I've heard they do down in Florida. Forget it, partner—I'm a tough guy, an' ain't wantin' to be coddled like a baby."

"Just the same I say we're going to land, if

half a chance shows up," affirmed the pilot, in that set way of his. "We'll find the stuff to build some sort of fire, Perk, where you could make a pot of hot coffee; which'd do you more good than a switch of hard liquor. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Perk remained silent for almost two whole minutes, during which time no doubt he was revolving in his mind what Jack had proposed—in imagination he could almost *smell* the delicious aroma of the coffee, boiling so merrily over the red coals and even feel a joyous sensation of warmth stealing through his chilled body.

"Okay, Jack; you win, hands down. Me for the coffee every time, to be followed by a quiet smoke o' my fav'rite brand o' tobac. Have your own way about it, partner."

"Then get ready to try and make out what sort of ground we'll soon be passing over," added Jack, as he turned the ship earthward, and slid down on a long glide, with the motor clamped shut. "We'll skim along close enough for you to get a good idea as to how matters stand, and yet giving enough distance to keep clear of any clump of trees, or little bald knobs of rises."

Presently Perk assured him he could manage to get fair glimpses at what lay below; at which Jack again started on an even keel, moving with as little speed as was compatable with safety.

It was not very long before the watcher gave tongue.

"Looks good to me down yonder, partner—guess now we might make a safe an' sane landin'—'specially with *you* at the stick. Circulate a little bit to the south, brother, 'cause it looks some better thataways."

This Jack did, and then at another signal from the observer, he proceeded to drop down with almost as much confidence as he might have felt when making a landing on Candler Field, well lighted, and with every convenience suited to safety and comfort.

His confidence, it seemed, had not been misplaced, for they effected a very fair contact, all things considered, even though the landing was somewhat "joggly and rough" as Perk expressed it.

Once the ship came to a stop and both of them hastened to clamber out of their close quarters—"cribbed, cabined and confined," Jack sometimes liked to say in connection with their limited cockpit, although his pal always reminded him of the fact that *cabin* was something only conspicuous by its absence.

Perk's first movement was to start threshing his arms against his thighs with more or less vigor, in which he showed good common sense since there is no better method for stirring up

sluggish circulation after a long period of inaction. Jack on his part commenced to check up on certain sections of the undergear, meaning to make certain he had done no damage in making connection with the earth under such unfavorable conditions.

"Everything in ship-shape, I reckon, Perk," he announced. "And now let's make out to find something in the line of trees, where we might pick up enough wood for that fire."

"Looks kinder like things'd be mighty well soaked after all that downpour," affirmed the shrewd Yankee-Canadian; "so it'd be a tough job coaxin' stuff to take fire. But wait a minute, partner—I didn't get a chance to tell you that I spied what looked like an ol' tumbledown shack over to windward — I guess now it might be abandoned, but just the same, partner, we'd be apt to run across some dry wood inside."

"Suppose you step over and take a look-in, Perk," suggested the other. "I'll stand by the crate here, and keep our little glim working, so you'll get your bearings when you start back."

"You said it, Jack," acceded the lanky one, always eager for any sort of service; "an' by the same token now I'll tote my gun along—never c'n tell what sorter game you'll stack up against on these here Texas plains, I'm told. I feel like I could knock over a wolf er two, just to get my

blood to movin' at a faster clip—how 'bout it, boss?"

"Suit yourself, Perk," he was told, as Jack climbed back into the cockpit so as to manipulate the light he mentioned, and which would prove sufficient to serve the wanderer as a beacon when wishing to retrace his steps.

Accordingly Perk wandered off, having decided as to the quarter where he had glimpsed what looked like an old and lonely shack or cabin, faintly seen in the moonlight.

He came back in a short time, bubbling over with satisfaction.

"It's all right, Jack—just like I guessed, it turned out to be an ownerless shack but the roof looks like it might've shed the rain, an' oh! boy! heaps o' dry wood inside, with a whoppin' big fireplace where you could slap on the biggest log agoin'. Mebbe I ain't glad you thought o' this game. Come along, an' we'll fetch the stuff for a warm snack—coffee, crackers, an' bacon in the bargain. Talk to me about luck, it's comin' to us in big chunks."

"Oh! we've got to get used to that sort of thing," said Jack, in the most matter-of-fact tone imaginable; "when you're on such a wonderful lay as this anything's likely to happen, and all kinds of surprises spring out at you."

"I wonder," was all Perk could say in reply;

but he lost no time in gathering together such articles as aluminum coffeepot, skillet, cups, and such other things as he knew would be needed to complete their little midnight spread.

"I reckon it's safe for us to leave our crate off here," remarked the cautious Jack, "but I'll fix things so no busybody can take-off while we're away," which he did without any trouble; after which they both set out to move along to the deserted shack Perk had located, lying right there, just as if a favoring Fate had designed it for their especial benefit in an emergency, as the grateful Perk told himself.

Arriving at the humble shack, that once may have housed a happy family in days that were gone, they made use of Jack's electric torch in order to gather some dry splinters of wood, which, heaped above some paper on the open hearth, soon blazed up, and afforded them an opportunity to take a look around.

Other fuel more lasting was hurriedly added to the fire, and this done the two air adventurers took stock of their surroundings. There was nothing much to see, since the shack happened to be entirely devoid of any kind of furniture, even of the most primitive make; but the roof had stood the ravages of time, and promised to hold out for years still to come.

Perk held out his chilled hands to the blaze

but only for a few minutes; apparently the possibility of brewing some "nectar" was an overpowering temptation, for presently he started to work.

In short order he had the steam coming out of the coffee pot spout, and a most delightful odor permeated the interior of that ancient shack. When the coffee was ready, Perk poured some of the amber fluid in both aluminum cups, and offered Jack one, together with a freshly opened carton of tempting crackers.

"Goes right to the spot," the self-made *chef* observed, rubbing a hand across his stomach, as though experiencing the most blissful sensation there; "best coffee I ever tasted, barrin' none, an' say, I've tried it a good many places like France and Germany, as well as in Turkey too."

"Same here," Jack assured him, as he drained his first cup. "By the way, didn't you say you'd fetched some bacon along over here?"

"Jest what I did, partner, an' now I've had my fust swaller o' coffee I'll get a move on an' soon have some o' the same asizzlin' in the pan."

He started to carry out his words, with the interested Jack watching his efforts to try and make the frying pan set evenly on the fire, a feat that requires considerable knowledge of camp tactics in order to be successful. After one near spill, with Perk only saving an upset by quick

work, Jack modestly broke in to give a bit of advice, not forgetting, however, that old saying about "toc many cooks spoil the broth."

"Too hot to keep hold of the handle looks like, partner; now if only we were outdoors we might find stones enough to form some sort of foundation on three sides of the fire, where you could rest your pan. Hold on, here's this old hearth that was made of some kind of Mexican bricks—adobe they call them and it looks to me like some of 'em might be loose. Here, I'll manage to pry a few up for you, Perk, old man—just hold—your—horses and——"

Jack did not finish his sentence, and the cook, glancing up to see what ailed him, found his pal holding the first adobe in an uplifted hand, while he was himself staring hard into the cavity from which it had come, as if he saw something wonderfully fascinating there!

CHAPTER XIX

FORTUNE KNOCKS AT THE DOOR

"I swan! what's the matter, partner—my sakes; is it a *rattler* you uncovered, I wanter know?"

Perk on his part was already sharing the excitement of his pal, although apparently from an entirely different reason. He had already started to scramble to his knees, being doubtless bent on taking some aggressive action, when he saw Jack reach forward and deliberately pluck some object from the hole under the displaced adobe fire brick, and hold it up to view.

As he saw its nature Perk's jaw dropped, and he was the picture of abject astonishment—but it was far from being any poisonous reptile that Jack was thus exhibiting with such a grand flourish; just as though he might be some necromancer or magician, and drawing all manner of amazing things out of an apparently empty stove-pipe hat.

"Gosh-a-mighty! that looks like real money! I swan!" burst from Perk's lips, as he continued to stare.

"Just what it's supposed to be, Pal Perk," said Jack, trying to keep his own voice from displaying a genuine tremolo—"a neat wad of it, waiting here for us to drop in and pick it up. Seems like things might be set up, like tenpins in the alley, for two lucky dogs to knock down with a couple of rolled balls."

"If that don't beat anything I ever did see," continued the astounded Perk, now grinning, as though the pleasant nature of their find was commencing to appeal to him. "Jest think o' a pair o' air tramps ahappenin' along, runnin' across this here deserted shack, an' findin' a fortune askin' to be taken care of—don't it beat the Dutch what c'n happen—Arabian Night's adventures can't hold a candle to the real thing in these modern days. Some ol' miser musta hid that boodle under the bricks, so's to keep the Mex raiders comin' up over the international border from gettin' their itchin' fingers on it—how 'bout that, Jack?"

"Off color, I'm afraid, Perk," Jack told him, after taking a quick look at his wonderful find in the hearth *cache;* "that miser story might go with some but it doesn't wash with me worth a red cent. In the first place if this money had been hidden here by a miser, he'd have taken it away with him when he cut stick. Then again it would surely have been partly in hard cash,

like gold eagles, and such stuff—all hoards of misers, you remember, are made up like that, Perk, and when you give this the once-over you'll also notice how it's all in bills, mostly fresh ones at that, as if they hadn't seen much circulation, as you might say."

Perk drew in a long breath, and continued to stare hard at the object Jack was holding out in front of him; it might be that something in the other's words and manner suggested certain possibilities that seemed almost too staggering for poor Perk to digest offhand.

"Gee whittiker jewsharps! Jack—what's this you're hintin' at, ol' pal—give it to me easy-like, so I c'n swaller it—all in bills—mostly fresh ones at that—not seen much handlin' around—say, are you tryin' to tell me they're every one five dollar bills,—Jack?"

"I reckon that's what they are, Perk, I'd say, from taking a quick look at the same."

"Bad currency—counterfeits—bogus stuff, er —what?" gasped the other.

"Look for yourself, and you'll recognize them as having been printed from the same plates as the one we're carrying with us as a sample of Slippery Slim's best work."

"Je-ru-salem crickets! I'm knocked silly for a fact," whimpered Perk; and then, as if mustering up his vanishing stamina he went on to add:

"but however could they've got right there under that brick—conjurer's black magic, looks like to me, partner, it sure does."

"Nonsense! that part of it is easy enough to figure out," asserted Jack, as usual very matter-of-fact; "the only thing that seems to border on the miraculous is our running across this packet of all the people in the Far West—it looks to me as if some sort of Destiny might be handling the cards—that all we have to do is to keep moving and everything's bound to come our way."

"Sure does seem like a snap, and that's a fact," agreed Perk, calming down a little as he began to grow more accustomed to the great discovery that had resulted from their deciding to drop down, and have a sociable cup of hot coffee; "but I'll be danged if I c'n make head or tail out o' this happening—now, what under the sun did anybody want to stick that wad o' long green under the same adobes, I'd like to know, partner?"

"Oh! there might be any number of answers to that question, Perk; for instance didn't we learn that it was the habit of Slim, or one of his busy bees, to jump across the border every little while with a load of the flimsy, and dole the stuff out to a number of agents he has working with him in this section of the country, also all the way over to Los Angeles and San Diego?"

"That was the spiel they gave us, for a fact, boss," admitted Perk, wagging his head eagerly, as though he felt certain clever Jack would be able to figure things out, and hit on some sort of explanation that would cover these mysterious happenings.

"Well, this, then, might be one of his hidden *caches*—at certain times this unknown agent hides some *real* money in such a hole as this, and comes along another dark night it might be to pick up the big wad that was left in exchange for the small one he contributed. And that is the way the game runs, so I was told."

"By gum! but what grand luck for us to come in on this deal, Jack—pretty soft, I'd call it, and neither of us had any hand in it either—just hit on this little bank by sheer chance! Goin' to crib the loot, are you, partner?"

Jack scratched his head as though certain plans were flitting through it, and he must make a choice.

"Well, we have to start somewhere, you understand, Perk, and it looks like the finger of Fate might be pointing right at this shack, and telling us to get busy and pick up a strong clue that, if followed up, would take us straight to that hideout Slim's got across in Mexico."

"Guess I see what you mean now, brother," ventured Perk, his face lighting up with extreme

joy; for he felt they were already on the track, and that from that hour there must be rapid action continuously. "If so be that 'ere critter that slams out these bills on greenhorns and come-ons is gettin' anxious to see what sorter prize he's drawn in the lottery, why, he might jest come along any ol' time now, since the storm's over an' there's nawthin' to hold him up. Got any idea he's nigh due here, partner?"

"Shouldn't be a bit surprised if he walked in on us any time," ventured Jack; and then, seeing the puzzled look on his chum's rugged face he went on to add: "I didn't mention the fact but while we were making our way over from the ship I felt certain I glimpsed several far-off lights, as if they might be in windows of cabins or houses of some sort. Then, too, I surely did hear a big dog barking, and something like a rooster crowing."

"Well, I'll be jiggered if you ain't got sharper ears than I c'n boast, Jack, ol' hoss, which ain't no lie either."

"Don't you believe it, Perk; it just happened that you were so wrapped up in thinking of that coffee treat you didn't pay as much attention to outside things as I did. So it seems as if there might be some kind of a village or prairie town not more than two miles from this abandoned old shack and if that's so then the chances are

this agent who's been working the public for Slim probably lives there. Then again, like as not he has a pretty good idea about when his bunch of kale ought to be placed under that brick—in fact he might have made his way out here this very night only for the storm threatening."

"Just so, partner," Perk hastened to say, brimful of energy, "which, bein' the case, it's up to us to lay a sweet little mantrap, so's to trip him by the heels if so be he knocks on our door. How'll we fetch it, Jack?"

"First of all we'll finish our supper, and clean up here," came the ready explanation; "he may smell the odor of coffee and bacon, but then you might expect this shelter to be used once in a while by Mexican tramps, or passing cowboys, especially when a big storm threatens, so that isn't going to scare the Johnny. As for us, we'll fix things so as to give him a nice little surprise, by hiding out, after making things all dark inside here, with water thrown on the fire to smother the hot coals, after which there's nothing to do but take things easy until he shows up—if he does."

"I sabbe, okay, partner; let's get busy, for the bacon's done brown to a turn."

CHAPTER XX

SPRINGING THE TRAP

There was much that must be done before they could feel satisfied they had their mantrap arranged. Jack realized that if the party who played the part of local agent for the counterfeiter gang had been kept from coming to secure the fresh supply of bogus bills by the threatening storm, he was likely to make his appearance at almost any time, since all danger from the electrical disturbance was now past.

They finished their little supper without wasting any more time, after which the matter of hiding all traces of their presence was taken up.

"See if you can find any water outdoors, Perk," Jack was saying, as he contemplated the red embers of their late fire. "Seems to me I stepped in some sort of a puddle while coming up to the door. Here's an old rusty can that looks as if it'd hold a quantity—I want to dash it on these coals so as to cool them off. That done we'll find some way to hide, and watch developments."

Perk sized up the situation cleverly enough, and lost no time in setting about doing as his pal suggested. When he came back he was carrying the rusty can, which did leak a trifle, but then that made no particular difference, so long as enough water remained to put the fire out.

It sizzled, and steamed a bit but Perk distributed the fluid contents of his can with such discretion that all this was speedily brought to a finish, with the last red ember cooled off, leaving a dead little pile of wood ashes as the only reminder of their blaze.

"Now that's settled, partner," said the always ready Perk, "what comes next on our program?"

Jack had his hand electric torch in use, for otherwise they must have been left to grope around, since the clouds continued to drift past in clusters, shutting out most of the moonlight.

"We must gather up everything here that might give us away, for like as not the fellow'll fetch some kind of a light along with him—lantern it may turn out to be, because he knows its apt to be pretty dark inside the old shack, and he can't do much just by fumbling around."

"Yeah! that's right, boss," returned Perk, commencing to gather up any and all their scanty belongings, not forgetting that convenient rifle of his. "But I say, how 'bout the bus—

won't he lamp the thing settin' there in the open an' ain't it apt to give him a bad start?"

Jack had duly considered that very point in making up his plans, and was ready to meet the situation.

"Taken it all in all, buddy, there's small danger of that happening," he went on to tell Perk. "First, remember, the ship lies on that side of the shack away from the spot where I glimpsed those lights and if he comes along in a direct line from the town there isn't one chance in three of him noticing it. Even if he does I reckon he'll feel dead certain only his own messenger'd be flying in this region—he may never have seen another crate besides the one sent out by Slippery Slim."

"She sounds good to me, Jack an' I'm willin' to take a shy at the target, if so be you guess it's straight goods, all wool'n a yard wide. Let's go!"

Accordingly both passed out of the deserted shack that had proved such a fortunate harbor for them after the late storm. Jack knew what they must do in following up the little plan he had framed, with a view of giving the suspect the shock of his life and without any further preliminaries he set about carrying out the few details.

"There's a chink or two in this further wall,"

he went on to say, in a low voice, next door to a whisper, "that will furnish us means for keeping tabs on what's going on inside. We'll settle down there, and just wait. As luck has it that side of the shack is away from the moon, which is all in our favor, in fact everything seems to be arranged just to suit our plans."

"Bully set-up, boss, couldn't be better for a fact," agreed the hopeful Perk, who firmly believed in the element of Luck, and was immensely gratified to discover how that little god was working over-time in their favor—according to his way of thinking it was always "better to be born lucky than rich."

"How about it?" whispered Jack, after they had commenced to crouch down in the darkened spot he had selected.

"Just great, that's all," Perk assured him, show me where one o' them cracks c'n be located, partner, an' then I'll be okay—all fixed."

Jack obliged by directing his chum's hand to an opening, through which it would be easy enough to keep watch over any happening inside the shack.

"Next we'll creep over to this further corner, and try to find out when he comes along," continued Jack. "From now on, Perk, keep your tongue between your teeth—no talking, re-

member, but if it does seem to be absolutely necessary, put your lips close to my ear, and whisper—get that?"

"Nuff sed, boss, I'm on," came faintly from the figure crouching at Jack's side, after which abject silence fell upon the scene.

A little later on Perk, now that his hearing was strained so as to pick up any kind of sound, however slight, caught the barking of a watch-dog; it seemed to be at a considerable distance from the shack, and he judged there might be a couple of miles lying between. This was not a great amount of ground to cover, if only the inducement were sufficiently urgent and that fat packet of enticing bank bills, supposed to be secreted under the adobes of the old hearth, must represent an alluring prize, capable of drawing a chap who was fond of "easy money" out of his snug home at this unseasonable hour of the night, and indulging in a little hike, for which effort he would fancy himself well repaid.

Some time passed.

They lay there just back of the corner of the dilapidated and abandoned shack, waiting, listening, and frequently feeling a little thrill when some soft sound came stealing to their ears.

Then Perk plainly heard what was surely a low cough, such as might be caused by a sudden tickling in the throat. Some one was undoubt-

edly approaching the spot, and coming from the west, where they understood the prairie hamlet, or village, lay at the foot of a small ridge.

He merely touched his companion's right arm to let Jack know something was in the wind. The cough was repeated, so that Perk chuckled softly to himself, as if more than ever convinced that luck was bent on handing them out further fat plums.

Jack was already creeping back so as to reach the spot where those convenient peepholes could be found and of course Perk imitated his example. Thus it came about they were in complete readiness to make good use of their eyes when a slight scratching sound came from within, and a tiny flash announced that the newcomer had struck a match.

Perk could see him there down on his knees, and intent on applying his lighted match to the wick of a lantern he had evidently fetched along for this very purpose. If Perk could have analyzed the feeling that possessed him just then he must have compared it to the exultation of a cat when about to make a jump upon a sparrow, close up to which he had managed to hide, all prepared for the finishing act of the ambush.

No sooner had the man succeeded in lighting his lantern than with eager hands he commenced lifting the adobe under which Jack had again

artfully placed the bait in the shape of that tempting packet of bogus notes.

How eagerly he pounced on the contents of his queer *cache,* all the avariciousness of a miser handling his hoard was displayed and at the same time he looked hurriedly from one side to the other, as though his guilty soul, conscious of having thus broken the law of his country, was already seeing the long arm of Justice stretching out menacingly toward him.

Jack evidently had seen enough to satisfy him the genuine criminal was in focus, and that there could be no miscarriage of Justice in effecting his capture with the goods upon him. He was creeping toward the open door of the shack, evidently bent on taking the slick partner of the counterfeiter chief by surprise.

Perk lost no time in crawling at his pal's heels, bent on having a hand in the closing scene of the little drama—he wanted to see with his own eyes just how such a slimy beast would take his "bump" when he found the meshes of the net closing around him.

They were soon looking in at the open door. The man still knelt there on the hard earthen floor of the shack, and appeared to be nervously fumbling the sheaf of bills, as though trying to count them, and be assured that he had received

the full amount to which he was entitled—that there had been no "holdout" attempted.

Perhaps one of them happened to make a slight sound—either that, or else the man's guilty soul caused him to fancy he heard something for he turned his head. It chanced that the light of the lantern fell full upon his dark face, and disclosed the distended eyes filled with terror, as well as the expression so ghastly that passed athwart his countenance.

"Put 'em up!" commanded Jack, sharply, in a voice that would brook no nonsense and as if mechanically influenced to obey, the wretched trapped distributor of bad notes raised both hands, the packet falling to the floor as if his nerveless fingers could no longer retain their grip.

Jack and Perk stepped blithely into the lighted shack, the former with his ready automatic covering the badly shaken rogue, Perk trailing his rifle in a suggestive way, as if able to back his boss up on the slightest provocation.

First frisking the other, and removing a gun from his back pocket, Jack made a motion with his hand as he set Perk to work.

"Get the bracelets on him, partner, then we'll ask him a few leading questions before we make up our minds what the next step'll be."

"But—hold on, Mister," whined the poor

devil, all aquiver as he groveled there on his knees; "I ain't done nawthin'—this hear ain't my stuff—I jest suspicioned Jud he must a had somethin' hid out this way, 'case he kep' comin' an' agoin', so I kim tuh see what it mout be. Now I knows he must a robbed thet bank over in Tucson when he went off with a gang he runs with."

"Stow that gab," said the disgusted Perk, "that's all too flimsy to wash. We got you to rights an' where the hair's short, an' you'll have a chanct to see what the inside o' the pen at Atlanta's like. This here's counterfeit long-green, an' you knows it, mister," with which cutting remark he snapped a pair of steel handcuffs upon the other's wrists with the skill only one accustomed to handling such "safety-first" contraptions could display, proving that for one of Slippery Slim's active lieutenants the show was indeed over.

CHAPTER XXI

PICKING UP CLUES

By this time the man whom Uncle Sam's two clever sky detectives had trapped, showed signs of being almost in a state of collapse. Too late did he realize what a terrible mistake he had made when yielding to the blandishments of Slippery Slim Garrabrant, and acting under the belief that he could defy the law and get away with it.

"What's the big idea, partner," Perk was asking after he and Jack had fixed things so there was no possible chance for their prisoner to break away, and give them the laugh. "Do we jump off right now, or wait till mornin', I'd like to know?"

"No hurry at all," was the calm reply, "I want to go over our crate once more before we start that hop across to the California border, I've good reason to believe things are okay but a second overhauling will satisfy me better."

"I kinder guess you won't want me to slip over to this here town, an' pick up a few fresh eggs, eh, boss?" and Perk's voice actually took

on a wheedling vein as he made this remark for if there was anything he dearly loved along the line of "eats" it was those same "fresh eggs."

Jack shook his head.

"Hardly think it would be wise," he observed; "we don't know the lay of the land for one thing—it might be this party has some backing among his neighbors, and we'd find ourselves in a hornets' nest before we knew what was what. No, we can stick it out here the balance of the night, which is pretty well gone right now, and be off about sunrise."

"There's a lot more stuff around in here that'd burn right well," insinuated Perk; "how 'bout another bit o' fire—this night air feels some cool to me an' 'sides, we'd have a blaze ready so's to boil more coffee 'fore we kick off, eh, what, partner?"

"Please yourself so far as that goes, Perk, I reckon it wouldn't feel at all bad to have some fire, as we must hang out here several hours. But don't make any noise if you can help it. Besides, we ought to keep an eye out for trouble, no telling what this slick chap might work off on us."

"Oh! we'll one o' us keep watch off'n on," promised Perk, starting without any further delay to gather some fuel, and get a blaze going.

While he was thus engaged Jack took their

prisoner in hand, and commenced to grill him. There was nothing of the dreaded "third degree" rough-house measures in what Jack attempted but he tried to show the man where his best interests lay.

"You're in a bad fix, my friend," Jack told him: "and unless you come clean, so as to help us round up the balance of your outfit, you'll be certain to get the full penalty the law lays down. We know a whole lot about Slippery Slim and his ways, and are dead certain we're bound to end up his graft before many more days pass by. So when you're answering my questions don't try to lie to me, for like as not I'll be already acquainted with the facts and know you're trying to beat around the bush. Dangerous business, let me tell you; far better for you to hold your tongue than deceive me. Come clean, and I promise you I'll do everything in my power to have you let off easy, besides no one need know you've turned State's evidence.

Then he started in to put pointed questions, concerning certain points that were vital to his plans. Once he caught the man squirming under the lash, and giving an answer that he very well knew was like "beating around the bush."

"You know better than that, my friend," he told him sharply, "that's only half a truth you've given me. Don't try it again if you know what's

good for your health, or it'll be a matter of possibly ten years before you see your family again. Stick to the truth, and it may be only a question of six months you'll spend at Atlanta behind the bars. Now tell me again what I wanted to know."

He had managed to impress his strong personality upon the writhing wretch, who was ready to throw himself unreservedly upon his mercy and so the answers were given without hesitation, although in some instances the man declared he did not know, as he had only once been across the line and visited Slippery Slim in his hideout among the Mexican mountains.

When Jack realized that he had really pumped the other dry, he felt he had profited in many ways and that their sudden determination to make a night landing, so as to recover after their buffeting by the storm, had been a most fortunate happening indeed.

For one thing he had learned that the name of their frightened prisoner was Simon Hawkins, and that he had a wife and several children living in the little prairie town only a few miles distant—a fact that seemed to give him great distress, now he found his avaricious dreams wrecked, and himself in the hands of a couple of those very same Secret Service detectives whom the "big boss" had undoubtedly referred to so contemptuously.

Perk had been "listening in," and chuckling happily whenever he realized his mate had made some sort of a "ten-strike," picking up valuable information that was destined to ultimately serve their ends wonderfully, and help to "pot their game."

They sat there for some time, talking in low tones. The man who lay close by helpless was silent as a rule, although several times he uttered a dismal groan, when his feelings overpowered him.

"Guess I'll step out, partner," remarked Perk at one time, "an' slip over to the ship, I'd sure hate to have some critter do us a bad turn by meddlin' with any o' them dials an' gadgets. What I wouldn't do to *him* would be a caution, that's right."

From the fact that Perk carried his rifle along with him his meaning was not difficult to understand and Jack felt sorry for the chap who was at the other end of the gun sights when his pal pulled the trigger.

Perk cautiously approached the grounded ship, and started when discovering some moving object just in its shadow. The moon was shining brightly now, so that it was an easy matter to see for quite some little distance, although so deceptive was the light that even sharp-eyed Perk could hardly have told whether some dark object

seen fifty feet off was a stump or a black dog sitting there and watching him.

Waiting until the object moved again, he discovered he had been wise to hold his fire, for by then he had made it out to be some species of animal. He took several forward steps, whereupon the beast started to move off, uttering a little nasty snarl while doing so.

"Shucks, on'y a stinkin' kiote after all, skulkin' 'round to see if he c'n stir up a little grub o' any kind. Get out, you varmint!" and he waved his gun above his head while starting to run forward.

This completely demoralized the cowardly prairie marauder, so that he took to his heels, and quickly vanished in the near distance. Perk found everything all right when he gave the stranded plane "the once over"; and being satisfied that there was nothing to be feared from a coyote prowling around in search of a supper or breakfast, he returned to the shack to report all well.

Jack was busily engaged making certain notes, and reading others connected with their present business, as jotted down in his memorandum book in a peculiar brand of short-hand all his own, but which would appear as so much Greek or Choctaw to any one else.

"Better turn in, and get a few winks of sleep,

brother," he told Perk, who had yawned once or twice as he sat before the fire. "I'll wake you up in about an hour or so when you can take your turn playing sentinel, until the dawn shows up."

"Just as you say, old hoss," came the ready reply; "fact is, I'm a bit drowsy, an' could get away with a few winks; but don't forget to wake me when the hour's up, remember."

"That's all right, partner," Jack told him, laughingly; "we're in this game thirty-thirty, and you'll have your turn, depend on it. Now get busy, and don't you dare snore above a whisper either."

"If I do jest gimme a poke, Jack—tryin' to break myself o' that nasty habit but I got to have help, you know—no feller ain't wholly responsible fur what he does when he's asleep."

In due time Jack aroused the other, and himself sought a brief period of forgetfulness in sleep. So the balance of the night passed, and morning came with a clear sky, and a promise of decent weather for the continuance of their flight.

CHAPTER XXII

OVER ARIZONA DESERTS

Perk must have dreamed about that hot coffee treat he had been promising himself, for when Jack opened his eyes he found his comrade already watching the bubbling pot, from which delightful odors were commencing to escape in the way of steam.

They enjoyed quite a decent little breakfast, what with the ambrosia contained in their aluminum cups together with some crackers and jam, after the crisp bacon had been disposed of. Jack offered some to their prisoner, but the man sadly shook his head, as if to say he had no appetite whatever.

He was not a bad looking fellow, only with a weak sort of chin, and evidently built along a line that could be easily tempted to go wrong if the inducement were only gilded enough. Jack felt sorry for him, especially since he had learned about his family; and was determined to do what he could so as to get Simeon off, should his information prove of any value to their cause.

Once breakfast was disposed of they all went

over to where the ship lay. By this time Simeon had found that they really planned to carry him off with them, a startling fact that added to his alarm, for apparently he had never been up in a plane, and a species of stage-fright made him shake as if he had the ague.

But there was no other way to work things, for should they set him free the chances were the man, forgetting his promise, would try to send out some kind of warning to Slippery Slim, and in the end he and Perk were apt to pay dearly for their slip-up, perhaps even with their own lives.

When playing such a desperate game with so canny a lawbreaker it would be the height of folly to let the dictates of tender hearts turn them from the path of "safety first," and Simeon must continue to "take his medicine," even though the innocent ones at home suffered for his misdeeds — he had never considered others whom his evil actions had doubtless harmed, when they found themselves arrested for passing worthless bills, and how could he expect these sworn officers of the law to go easy with him when caught in the act?

Perk now began to wonder just how they would be able to "tote" a third party in the limited accommodations afforded by the double cockpit of their ship. It was bound to prove a

tight squeeze, and not so comfortable but then why grumble on account of a trifle like that, when Fortune was giving them such a glad hand all the while?

He began to shift things around some while Jack was busy checking the motor, struts, undergear, and propeller, with the design of condensing, and making more room.

"Funny how you c'n jam things into such a small compass when you really an' truly try," he told Jack, when he had finished his task. "I kinder guess I'll be able to fix him okay, 'cause he's no great shakes at size, an', seems like to me, he's shrinkin' right afore my eyes, he's that shaky. Then it's only for the day, I figger; how 'bout that, Jack?"

"I've planned all that out, partner," he was told. "As soon as we get over to the California border we'll give him in charge of some sheriff to keep in the hoosgow till we've made our killing, and are ready to deliver the whole batch to Uncle Sam's nearest U. S. District Attorney, at Los Angeles or San Diego. That clear to you, Perk?"

"I'd say it was, boss, an' here's hopin' we'll get there with both feet when the end shows up, our prisoners hobbled, an' with nice new steel bracelets decoratin' their wrists. Now to get the gent aboard the boat, an' stowed away.

Shucks! he acts like he might be scared out o' a year's growth—some sillies get that way 'bout goin' up in a skyscraper the fust time."

His scorn for such a weakling showed in his face as he helped Simeon to clamber into the cockpit. The man was as white as a sheet, and trembling as if expecting to meet with some dire end in short order, once he left the firm ground and took to the boundless air. His groans were heartrending, and Jack felt sorry for the wretch but for once Perk displayed no signs of sympathy, it was all so silly in his opinion.

He proceeded to take precautions by fastening the greenhorn in by means of a stout strap which would prevent his falling out should conditions necessitate a sudden banking on the part of the pilot, or a fierce gust of wind cause the ship to give a unannounced plunge.

"All ready, Jack," announced Perk, after completing these arrangements.

"I'll be with you inside of three minutes," he was told, and as the ground ahead had been examined, and found to be fairly good for the wheels to trundle over, there seemed to be nothing more that could be done, only put things to the test.

It was "some rough," as Perk told himself, when violently shaken once or twice but they managed to get up sufficient speed to admit of

Jack lifting her when the right time arrived. Then they were off, rising like a bird, and almost immediately opening up the village that nestled there two miles off, at the foot of the low ridge.

Jack headed straight into the west, for that was their route "as the crow flew." He cared not at all that they would pass directly over the settlement, for few of the people were apt to be abroad at such an early hour, nor would they be any the wiser for seeing a plane pass overhead at such a low altitude.

Perk, looking down, found himself wondering which of the modest cottages in line of his vision chanced to be the home Simeon had spoken of with such a catch in his voice. The man had temporarily forgotten about his fears concerning his own safety, while being carried so high above the surface of the earth—he was stretching his neck, and eagerly focussing his staring eyes on one spot, which evidently held all that he held dear. Perk ignored his recent sensation of scorn, and actually felt sorry for the man.

"Poor guy," he was saying under his breath, though the other could not have heard him had he shouted at the top of his lungs, on account of the racket being kicked up by combined motor and propeller, "he feels right bad 'cause he's goin' off without a chanct to say goodbye. Well, I on'y hope this will be a lesson to Simeon, an'

he'll quit playin' with a buzz-saw, which is the long arm o' our Uncle Samuel."

Simeon tried his best to keep tabs of the lonely little hamlet until it was no longer possible to distinguish objects, owing to the several miles of distance the speeding plane had covered; then he fell back in his seat, and let his head drop on his chest, while his body shook with emotion. In that dreadful moment he would undoubtedly have only too gladly given all he had in the wide world for a chance to undo the wrongs he had committed in his haste to get rich.

"Shucks! he orter thought o' that before, while the goin' was good!" was Perk's comment, who had seen just such short-sighted men more than once before in his eventful life, and had a philosophical mind concerning all such late repentances. "But I'm sure sorry for them that are agoin' to suffer the most—he deserves all he'll get, but they're the innocent ducks."

The plane soared along its set course, and as they were not at more than something like five thousand feet altitude, Perk could see very well, when he adjusted the binoculars they carried of necessity, so as to be able to spy out conditions before trusting themselves to land, being naturally a bit suspicious while thus drawing steadily nearer to what might well be called enemy land.

From time to time he found himself gazing

down with considerable curiosity upon scenes which were mostly foreign to his eyes—he had only too often scrutinized pictures where uncounted troops belonging to the enemy were encamped, or on the march, with monster guns making the very air quiver with the tumult of their discharges; where rival pilots came up in answer to his insulting challenge, to engage him in deadly combat—he had seen many an unlucky or less skillful airman go down with his whirling, blazing coffin, yielding up his life as a tribute to what he called patriotism—all these and a multitude of similar thrilling spectacles could be unrolled in memory as he thus sailed the azure sky, and saw Jack meet and conquer successive air pockets lying in wait to give him battle; and yet this was actually the first time Perk had ever focussed his gaze upon a genuine cattle ranch, and saw stock being driven to market, or it might be mavericks branded; so that he found himself entranced with the panorama spread before him as they glided over the prairies of New Mexico.

There cropped up other and like interesting sights when the wilder sector of country was reached, with its deep gullies, its bare-topped mountain peaks—perhaps stretches of desolate desert where nothing could be seen save billowy sandy wastes, except possibly patches of yucca,

sage, greasewood, and prickly pear cactus.

When, his interest increasing, Perk begged his comrade to drop down so as to give him a nearer view of these strange sights, he was able to increase his knowledge concerning the myriad of strange sights to be picked up when touring by air in new territories—now he could make out the fantastic Joshua trees that seemed to be engaged in a shimmering dance in the blazing sunlight; moving shadows that sometimes crossed the line of his vision he made out to be buzzards on the wing, circling in search of their carrion meal; while others on the ground he recognized as coyotes skulking along, frightened by the sight and noise coming from far over their heads, and trying to reach their secret dens in some rocky canyon or defile.

Noon came in due time, with the ship keeping up its steady grind, and having left hundreds of miles in its wake.

Perk began to realize that he had eaten his breakfast at an unearthly hour, and concluding that a bite of something, together with a swig of water from their jug, might go well, he mentioned the interesting fact that the usual lunch hour had come, at which Jack nodded his head, as if to leave all that sort of thing to the discretion of his trusted pard.

So they had a pick-up snack, which was quite

acceptable to the two airmen, able to enjoy their meals even while cutting capers up among the clouds. It was another thing to the novice Simeon, whose appetite had not come back, though he did manage to swallow a few bites, and have a drink of cold water to wash things down. By slow degrees he was getting the upper hand of his dreadful fears, for while familiarity could not be said to bring contempt, nevertheless he was becoming accustomed to the conditions, and could even display a trace of curiosity when looking down on some unusually interesting spectacle to which Perk was pointing so eagerly.

If things continued to exist as they had been doing all morning it was likely—Jack at one time told his co-pilot in answer to a question—that they would be close to the California border by sunset, or shortly afterwards; since even then they were well along across Arizona, with fair skies still beckoning them on their way.

CHAPTER XXIII

ON TO THE COLORADO

"Listen, Perk, I've got something you should know—something that hinges on a change of plans."

Jack was saying this at a time when, relieved from the controls he could enter into one of the little confabs that their use of the ear-phones allowed. All Perk had to do was to lean forward and while still handling the stick drink in whatever his co-pilot chose to say.

"Yeah! spit it out then, partner," was his familiar way of inviting confidence and which meant so much with those who knew Perk's peculiar sayings best.

To be sure Simeon Hawkins was sitting close beside Perk, and what Jack meant to confide in his running mate could never be intended for his ears but despite this elbow to elbow touch there was not the slightest risk of his being able to pick up a single word, owing to the clamor kicked up by motor exhaust and propeller.

"We're going on a bit further than was arranged," said Jack, concisely.

"Huh! meanin' we don't pull up when we strike the border, eh, what, Jack?"

"Just that, brother—the going is good, and we might as well keep moving till we drop down on the Metropolitan Airport grounds."

"Whoopee! you mean at Los Angeles, don't you, old hoss?" demanded Perk, apparently considerably surprised by his pal's bald statement.

"Righto, Perk."

"How come, Jack?"

"Get this fixed in your noodle," said the resting chief pilot—"circumstances often alter cases, they tell us; well, when we figured on halting at or near the border, close to the Gila River, things hadn't happened such as have hit us since then."

"Meanin' the storm, Jack?"

"That was one thing," admitted the other.

"Knockin' us out o' our reckonin', like, an' makin' us take a forced landin' on the open prairie where we run across that flimsy ol' shack —does that cover what you mean, Jack?"

"After a fashion it does," the other told him, adding: "like the play of Hamlet, with Hamlet left out, it falls flat. You omitted the chief reason for my making this change in plans."

"I guess you must mean Simeon here, eh boy?" asked Perk, as if suddenly waking up to the fact.

"Sure thing—what are we going to do with *him,* tell me, Perk? It'd be impossible for us to lug him everywhere we mean to go, flying across into Mexico, and baiting the wolf in his own lair, as you might say. He'd be a constant hindrance to our being free to act besides, we'd run a fat chance of having him give us away, just when we thought it was all over but the shouting."

"I get you, Jack—it means you don't trust his promises to lend us a helpin' hand, and goin' back on his pals—ain't that the idea?"

"You said it," replied Jack, never bothering to drop his voice a particle, knowing as he did that without the aid of those valuable ear-phones Simeon, humped up against the side of Perk, could not have caught what was said even though it had been shouted at the top of his voice.

"Well, what then, partner?" continued Perk, apparently still groping in the dark.

"Nothing to hinder our tripping right along till we fetch up at Angeles, when we can find a way to hand him over to the Federal agents located there. He's connected with the big gang against which Uncle Sam's declared war to the knife; and as a material witness, ready to turn State's evidence, they'll be only too well pleased

to hold him *incommunicado,* so he can't do a thing to warn the bunch the big push is on."

"Okay, Jack. Sounds mighty good to me, you bet. I'd never a cudgeled my brains enough to hatch up an idea like that; takes you to think o' clever dodges, old hoss."

"Then we'll consider it settled, eh, Perk?"

"Just what we will," came the confident reply. "'Bout when ought we raise the last beacon on the road to Angeles, an' lamp the field lights at that same Metropolitan Airport?"

"Oh! if everything goes well, you might call it along toward midnight," Jack assured him.

"Got aplenty o' gas to carry on that far, I'd guess?" hazarded Perk.

"It's to be hoped so," said Jack; "because there's some mighty tough stretches of country between the Colorado and the big Pacific city."

"Yeah! so I understand, Jack."

"And it would be a bad job for us if we had to hit the ground where you couldn't scrape up a decent landing place with a fine-tooth comb. When I take the stick again, Perk, maybe you'd better have a look in, so's to get tabs on our fuel tank, and tell me how it stands. From the dial finger yonder I figure we'll have a lot more than enough to see us through."

"That's right, boss," affirmed Perk, after cast-

ing a hasty glance at the tell-tale figures so plainly marked.

"That settles it then," with which remark Jack showed by his actions that further conversation was needless.

And Simeon sat there through it all, never once dreaming how his fate was being so calmly settled; doubtless he imagined the consultation had been about something connected with the running of the cloud-chaser, and covered facts such as would have been all Greek to him, even had he been able to listen in.

Perk was not at all bothered by this change of plans on the part of the head pilot—it mattered little when they managed to drop down at the airport—chances were the ground lights were kept on full through the whole of each night, since air mail planes would be apt to come and go, some of them having been thrown out of their regular schedules by dense mountain fogs, or head winds that cut down the customary speed.

Perk, also, was well acquainted with the courtesy to be encountered at all such well conducted flying fields, where every one would be eager to do whatever was possible for the comfort of those who chose to visit such ports, and show little or no undo curiosity connected with the reason for their coming.

True, they might turn out to be a bit short with the "eats;" but Perk, who knew the ways of his pal so well, felt certain Jack would see to it they had a chance to "fill up" as soon as they could strike an open restaurant, of which there should be no lack in such a wide-open city as Los Angeles, with its sporty crowds at Hollywood.

The afternoon was moving on apace, and there cropped up fresh thrilling sights every little while, for Perk to stare at through his useful glasses. They were following the course of the famous Gila River toward its confluence with the still better known Colorado, which hundreds of miles further north passed through the Grand Canyon country, most majestic in a panorama sense of any region on the face of the globe.

Along about nightfall they might expect to pass over Yuma, located close to the junction of the two rivers. Perk wondered once or twice why his pal had not decided to land there, and turn the prisoner over to some one in authority; but he felt certain Jack had good reasons for not attempting this.

"Mebbe, now," Perk told himself, with Jack again running the ship, while he attended to some of his own manifold duties; "he guessed there might be a bad crowd at Yuma—

fellers apt to be in cahoots with the same gang o' daredevils Simeon here was connected with; and who might even try to effect his escape, so as to shut his trap—even go so far as to knife the poor skunk to make sure he didn't peach. Oh! yeah, that's the way Jack looked at it, bet your boots it must be."

Soon afterwards the sun gave notice that it was about to withdraw behind the line of mountains lying toward the west. Jack had his bearings, and expected to be able to pick up the flash beacons arranged for the convenience of the air mail corps in their night flights to and from Los Angeles. So thoroughly has this all been mapped out, with the signals to be found about every ten miles, that a pilot can see as many as three ahead at one time, depending on the altitude at which he may be flying.

Such wise precautions had been taken that would make night flying just as safe and easy as during the daytime one thing only cropping up from time to time to raise trouble, and cause delay was the presence of the fogs that were apt to rise from the deep canyons, to blot out those friendly gleams of flashing light marking the air mail course from start to finish.

CHAPTER XXIV

SIMEON GROWS DESPERATE

It was commencing to grow dusk when they sighted the lights of Yuma, that town on the railroad leading to Los Angeles. Such a thing as a plane flying overhead was so common these modern days as to hardly excite any comment—they came and went, with seldom anything out of the usual taking place although not so very far away, among the mountains, one of the most dreadful of all air tragedies known to the annals of flying had taken place, when the great liner *City of San Francisco,* lost in a storm, struck head-on against a rocky cliff, shattering the ship and causing the death of every one of those aboard, some seven souls in all.

Now they had left Yuma far in their rear, and Jack was watching to pick up the first flash beacon on the way to the Coast.

The weather continued to favor them, the heavens being almost devoid of any semblance of clouds, and the air quite cool at the height they maintained while heading into the beckoning west.

Over deserts and mountainous stretches they kept swinging along, to the constant accompaniment of the customary chorus of a bustling plane threading the mighty air lanes of the skies. The silvery stars came out in battalions to sprinkle the azure heavens like innumerable bright lanterns, such as could be seen in Old Japan during carnival times.

This was the life, Perk told himself again and again, sitting there after he had munched his scanty portion of their meagre supper, Simeon having again declined to share with them—what air pilot who has tasted of the joys of such hours could ever dream of forsaking his vocation, so long as Fortune allowed him to retain his vision, hearing, and the faculty for guiding an onrushing ship through the realms of unlimited space—not he for one, Perk assured himself, drawing in huge draughts of the clear air, and watching the wonderful beacons as they passed them by, threading the pathway of the stars as it were, straight toward their distant goal.

The night wore on, with the voyagers making splendid progress.

Jack had made no miscalculation when saying he believed they would fetch up at their destination somewhere about the midnight hour; for it still lacked more or less of that time when in the near distance they glimpsed lights telling

that the city, and its nearby aviation field, must be close at hand.

Then they found themselves circling over the port, which, just as Jack had fancied would be the case, was lighted most brilliantly. Even as they sighted the field they noted a ship settling down, evidently an air mail plane that had been held up by some dense fog belt which they had fortunately missed.

"Soft snap I'd call it, droppin' down with all them field lights to show the ground, so a feller c'n see a rock the size o' a baseball," was what the tickled Perk was telling himself while Jack was proceeding to make the terminal drop, with several ground attendants hurrying up so as to lend any assistance needed.

He had received his instructions from Jack, and removed the handcuffs from the wrists of the prisoner. There was no necessity for letting everybody know the facts and the sight of a man wearing steel bracelets, and gripped by an attendant never fails to excite keen curiosity with most people and especially would this be the case if he had just come by the air route from some unknown and therefore mysterious quarter.

He would keep his arm through that of Simeon, and inform him in a forcible whisper that should he attempt any "funny business" it

would be at the risk of being shot down without further warning.

Jack would attend to everything necessary, such as having their crate stowed away in some convenient hangar, where it could be recovered at any time, by paying such charges as were customary.

To be sure Perk was questioned by several of the men while Jack saw that the ship was being taken care of but when he chose, Perk could keep a still tongue in his head and since he paid no attention to what was said, and never opened his mouth in the least, possibly they concluded he must be both deaf and dumb.

Perk may have chuckled deep down in his throat when he heard a few of the disgusted remarks some of the men exchanged concerning his lack of speech and hearing but he kept his own counsel; and in the end Jack came up saying he had secured a taxi to carry them to a small hotel down in the heart of the city, recommended by one of the hostlers who seemed to know what he was talking about.

Simeon had looked a bit anxious, as though wondering how their arrival at Los Angeles would affect his wretched fortunes but he made no attempt to appeal to the crowd for help. Undoubtedly he was firmly convinced that the grim Perk must be a man of his word, and that

any attempt on his part to break away would prove a most serious matter indeed.

"Yeah!" Perk was telling himself under his breath when he took note of this humble disposition on the part of Simeon, "Guess now he feels it's a heap better to be a live fool than a dead hero; an' by jinks I don't blame the beggar for thinkin' thataways either."

They were soon all three safely lodged in the taxi—which fortunately had remained up to this late hour, the driver hoping to pick up a fare—and heading for the nearby city.

Later on they entered the small hotel, and found it all the obliging ground attache at the port had said. Jack registered the party, all of them under fictitious names, since it paid to exercise due caution when on the track of big game just as it would for the big game hunter to make no sound when advancing upon an enormous tusker or "rogue" elephant whose spoor he had been trailing through forest and jungle.

"Would it be possible for us to have some supper sent up to our room?" Jack asked the night clerk who shrugged his shoulders as if dubious concerning his ability to accommodate them.

"Kindly try to have it done, if double price will have any effect," continued Jack, using his most gracious smile that usually accomplished

his purpose and at that the clerk responded by saying he would do his best but it was of course most unusual, and he hoped they would not make any complaint if the variety was not all they might wish.

"Quantity is the chief thing that interests us," said Jack; "you see, we have come by air, and fell short of food while on our way, so that my two pals here are very near being starved; so whatever you send make it a fairly bountiful spread, please."

Then they were shown to their room, which contained a double bed and a cot.

"I kinder guess now, partner," said Perk, after flashing a glance around the apartment, fronting on a back lot, though up in the third story of the building, "you an' me better share the bed, while Simeon gets his little nap on the sofy."

"That goes, Perk," his comrade told him "and after we've had supper we'll hit the hay. After such a broken night as we had back a ways some sleep ought to be welcome, I reckon."

"Huh! hope we don't have to wait too tarnel long for the grub, Perk was saying, dismally rubbing his stomach, as if to show how flat it seemed.

Jack engaged him in conversation of a general character, just to keep his mind from dwelling on the subject of eating for once Perk let him-

self believe he was in danger of famishing and he just could not subside but must commence to marshal all the known dishes of which he was especially fond, and keep on taunting and tantal izing himself by stringing them off as might a glib-tongued waiter in any restaurant.

After quite a tiresome wait there was a knock at the door, which Perk hastened to answer. Two waiters strode in, bearing trays laden with a pretty substantial assortment of food—quite a satisfactory display, Jack thought, considering the late hour, and that probably the regular kitchen force must have long ago turned in or else gone home.

The table fairly groaned under the assortment—Perk pertinently mentioned the fact, adding that he guessed he'd do his share of groaning *after* he had finished his supper which Jack did not doubt in the least, having a knowledge concerning the other's vast appetite, and unbridled disposition to make a pig of himself at such times when food was plentiful.

Simeon Hawkins was coaxed to sit down with them and as his state of mind seemed to have improved quite a little, he also partook of food of which he most certainly was much in need, having fasted so long and abstemiously.

When this ceremony had been carried through to a finish, the supply of visible victuals had been

wonderfully reduced; and even Perk was heard to declare he could not eat another bite, which meant he was like a stuffed turkey, fit for the Thanksgiving table.

Before turning in, Perk took occasion to "talk like a Dutch uncle," as he termed it, to Simeon, assuring him he need not be in too upset a state of mind concerning his future, since Jack had said he was bound to do all he could to have him let go, because of what he had confided to them, and such assistance he would be able to lend the Government in convicting the head men of the lawless conspiracy along the counterfeiting line.

The other nodded his head as though he understood that, having embarked in the game of throwing down Slippery Slim, he realized there was nothing else for him to do but go through to the windup.

So confiding Perk, thinking things would run smoothly, took off some of his outer garments, and rolled into bed, as it afterwards turned out, happily choosing that side of the same nearest to the windows of their room.

Jack soon followed, and the last thing he noticed ere snapping off the light was the humbled Simeon wrapped in a blanket, and lying there flat on his back, as though meaning to get what sleep he could during that fragment of the night still remaining.

Perk was, so far as appearances went, sound asleep; but then sometimes things are not just what they seem. To tell the truth, Perk had made up his mind ere lying down that he would "sleep with one eye open," as he called it, meaning it was his intention to keep on the alert, ready to jump out of bed at the least sign of trouble.

Perhaps when he thus decided it was with a hazy idea they might have some sort of unwelcome visitor during the night; he could not just decide how this could be but then those unprincipled agents of the counterfeiter king—like the fellow who had rifled the belongings of Scotty, the air mail pilot in Atlanta—were liable to turn up anywhere, everywhere, when least expected, and try to manipulate their bold games.

Hearing some sort of sound as of a person moving, Perk suddenly sat straight up in bed, to see their prisoner in the act of crawling over the sill of the nearby window, evidently bent on giving them the slip!

CHAPTER XXV

THE STAGE SET FOR BATTLE

"Hey! you, lay off that stuff!" was the way Perk exploded, even as he made a wild dash across the floor, and clutched the reckless Simeon by the arm, dragging him back into the room by sheer strength.

The other struggled but feebly perhaps he was really horrified at the desperate chances he had been about to take.

"Say, you must be goofy, Hawkins, to try that sort o' game!" Perk went on scornfully, as the wretched man writhed on the floor where he had flung him. "Don't you know it's two stories down to the roof o' that extension; an' chances are you'd a got a broken neck, or leg, in the drop. Better make up your mind to take the medicine an' stand it."

Jack of course had been aroused at the first movement of his chum, and sat up in bed watching the actions of the other.

"Trying to take leg bail, was he, Perk?" he remarked. "You can hardly blame the poor

dick, come to think of it because he's rubbing up against a tough proposition. Better put the bracelets on him again, and tie his ankles together he might get loco, and try to jump out of a window, just to end it all and that would be too bad."

Simeon, utterly cowed and silent, made no resistance when Perk followed out his pal's advice. There were several hours of the night still remaining, and they might as well secure such sleep as lay in their power, since no one could predict what sort of strenuous activity awaited them in the near future.

Came morning, and the two air detectives were stirring.

"Another right fine mornin' for us," Perk remarked, blithely, as he looked out of the window, and made a grimace at seeing what a nasty drop had awaited the desperate prisoner had he succeeded in carrying out his plan.

"Oh! that's the usual program, I understand, out here on the Coast," Jack told him. "Hardly ever see any rain in this blessed country; that's why they have to depend on irrigation for their crops."

"Plenty to keep us hoppin' today, I kinder guess, partner, eh, what?" volunteered Perk, as he started dressing, after removing the stout

cords that had been wrapped about the lower limbs of the Federal prisoner.

"You never said truer words, boy," Jack added "got to settle about this business of having our friend here held until the gate's been crashed, and our scoop put through. Then I mean to have a good talk with several people in the Government offices, who can give us a few points that so far we've been missing. You can't pick up too much information when aiming to stack up against smart lads like this Slippery Slim. He's got so many eyes on the watch the chap who expects to corral *him* must get up right early in the morning, and pull the wires in a dozen different directions. I'd a heap rather overdo the matter of taking precautions than to let just one ragged end get loose, for a game like this is only as strong as its weakest link."

"Do we eat here, or look up a restaurant?" asked Perk, quite naturally, since it was the easiest thing in the world for his thoughts to turn toward the subject of catering to the loud demands of his stomach, when the usual time for meals came around.

"On the whole I reckon it'd be as well for us to stick around, and have breakfast fetched up here," suggested Jack. "I'll step down presently, and see if it can be managed."

"Just as you say, partner," Perk told him, grinning, to add: "Make her two fried eggs and a rasher o' bacon for me; also a big cup o' coffee with a stack o' wheats done brown. Say, you might add some toast, and an orange, seein' that this is California, an' a feller ought to patronize the fruit industry when happenin' to visit the Coast country. Guess that ought to fill a vacuum okay, old hoss."

"Leave it to me, Perk, and you'll never starve to death I'm a good provider, and Uncle Sam foots the chuck wagon bill."

When later on two waiters appeared laden down with a mass of dishes, Perk grinned some more, and looked quite joyous; for the odor of coffee and bacon always pleased his sense of smell as nothing else could.

Poor Simeon had apparently about decided to make the best of a bad bargain, for he began sniffing as though the idea of breakfast appealed to him—he certainly needed something to brace him up.

Along about ten o'clock they prepared to set out for the offices of the Federal forces in Los Angeles. Simeon had finally given his word not to make any further attempt at escape. Jack had been talking seriously with the fellow ever since breakfast, trying to squeeze further information

from him, and holding out hope that if he "came clean" he might yet be allowed to go back to his family after the Government had made use of him to send the leaders in the wide flung conspiracy to prison for long terms.

Again a convenient taxi was called upon to convey the trio to their intended destination. Both Jack and Perk evinced considerable curiosity concerning the unfamiliar sights on the streets. They asked numerous questions of the driver, who chanced to be a communicative sort of fellow, and filled them up with information about the sunny queen city of the Coast.

It was not long before Jack's magical passport, sanctioned by the Big Boss at Washington, brought them in contact with several high officials who apparently had been secretly apprized of their presence in the West, and had also been requested to afford the two daring sky detectives all the assistance possible in carrying out their plan of campaign.

So it came about that Simeon was taken off their hands, after the story of his capture had been told. Jack secured a promise that the man would be lightly dealt with because of the valuable aid he had already afforded the sleuth-hounds of the air branch of the Law.

Both of them shook hands with the pitiful

looking chap as he was taken away by a marshal who had been summoned and who would see that he was kept aloof from all other prisoners until his testimony was wanted in court.

After that they fell into a general talk, Jack telling the deeply interested officials about the stirring adventures befalling himself and Perk since they first struck Atlanta, where the drive really had its beginning.

In return he was given such information as had been gathered in connection with more recent happenings along the line of Slippery Slim's operations and the fact of the matter was there always seemed to be fresh outbreaks of the bogus money disease in this or that part of the whole Southwest, as new agents started to work virgin territory until by this time the greatest unrest and uneasiness existed among all Government ranks.

The balance of that day the two pals put in taking a look around the city, visiting Hollywood, and seeing a number of movie stars whom they recognized from familiarity with their faces on the silver screen at various times.

Jack paid another visit to Federal headquarters on the succeeding day, to gather up all loose ends, and decide on his plans while Perk took himself off to look up some old friend, who,

he understood, was making good in one of the new big pictures.

They met again late in the afternoon, with Perk displaying signs of nervous tension for almost the first thing he said to his chum was in the shape of a leading question, which Jack undoubtedly anticipated, knowing Perk's headlong nature as he did, and the habit of the other for seeking speedy action.

"Wal, what's the good word, old hoss—when do we skip out from here, if so be it's all set?"

"No more hanging fire, brother," Jack assured him, smilingly "we're loaded for bear this time, sure pop. I've been out at the airport, and had a full tank of gas put aboard the crate as well as all that stuff you sent over so's to keep us from starving to death."

"Bully boy!" crowed the delighted Perk; "jest can't come any too soon to please me. I'm only cravin' a chanct for a set-to with the head o' this flim-flam bunch, who's laughed at the Government boys just once too often. Is it tonight, boss?"

"Midnight ought to see us several hundred miles on our way, if all goes well," Jack told him, not displaying any outward signs of jubilation himself, although he undoubtedly must be thrilled by the thought of how they were now

about to put everything to the test, and match their wits against that astute schemer, for whom the Federal prison doors were yawning so widely.

"You never gimme sweeter words, old pal!" Perk was saying, backed up by one of his most hideous grins.

CHAPTER XXVI

ON THE FACE OF THE MOON

Jack proved as good as his word, for they were off shortly after nightfall, and headed almost due east. No one at the aviation field had the remotest idea as to who they were, what their destination might be, and whence they came. But then this particular port was becoming a very important link in the trans-continental chain, with lines of great passenger and freight airships going and coming not to mention the several speedy air mail boats that covered their hundreds of miles day or night and as a rule on a schedule that seemed as perfect as that of any train time table.

Perk was unusually silent, at least for him. Perhaps he was realizing at last the serious nature of the job they had undertaken—that it was rather a weighty proposition, such as was bound to require all their united reserve force to put across.

Still, he had absolute confidence in Jack's ability to swing the undertaking, and also re-

fused to allow anything like doubt to assail him with regard to their united courage.

It was by this time well understood that the climax, when it came, would occur on Mexican soil for now that all accounts from every quarter were in hand, they knew absolutely that the den of the counterfeiting gang was in a secret cave among the mountains of Sonora also that the sagacious Slim had bought protection from certain local Mexican officials, who were suspected of secretly plotting a new revolution, and took this means for obtaining the money needed to purchase arms in the States.

It was even said that Slim never flew back to his headquarters without loading his swift plane with a dead weight of guns and ammunition as the price he had to pay for being allowed to operate undisturbed on foreign soil.

"A pretty kettle of fish, I'd call that sort o' game," Perk had indignantly asserted, when he learned of this see-saw method of currying favor with the plotting generals who hoped to once again turn the country upside-down and kick the present rulers out of office, as well as seize the city banks with their rich booty.

And so it was, but Jack realized how it accounted for the long spell of immunity Slim had enjoyed while he lined his pockets, and spread that financial panic throughout the Southwestern

States. There never had been his equal as a skillful worker and bold lawbreaker; one who knew how to set neighbor against neighbor, and make every one work so that he could rake off a heavy dividend from each separate deal.

So he had for a long time been coming and going, crossing the border, as a rule by the air route, carrying his cargoes of deceitful bank bills to various distributing points—like the one Jack and Perk had struck by sheer accident—gathering the genuine stuff contributed by his numerous dupes, and leaving bulky packages of the wonderfully executed spurious notes in exchange.

It was a veritable Golconda for the industrious worker, who, safe from interference, had kept as busy as the proverbial bee, that stores honey day after day.

They followed the line of swirling beacons the air mail boys were in the habit of trailing, since by this means they could pass some of the numerous danger spots on their route. In good time Jack expected to turn his back on these friendly flashing lights and head due south, to cross the border, and fly over foreign territory.

He had been placed in possession of certain secret documents issued by the Mexican government, which proved how they knew of the unholy alliance made between Slim, the counterfeiter

king, and those traitorous generals who yearned for fresh outbreaks so as to pamper their own personal fortunes, just then at low ebb.

There existed something of an arrangement, whereby the Mexican government agreed to stand back of any effort made by the Department at Washington to capture Slim, smash his gang that was widening its powers every day, and clean out the mess of near-bandits with whom he had allied himself.

If it were necessary all arrangements had been made whereby Colonel Jose Morales, with a crack regiment of hard fighting regulars who had seen much bloody service in bringing the defiant Yaqui Indians to terms by invading their mountain fastnesses, and meeting them hand-to-hand—was stationed within a day's ride of the ravine where Slim had his plant and could be summoned by means of certain smoke signals. No sooner would these "talking smokes" be detected than the order would be given "boots and saddles," with the mounted regiment in full swing for the debatable ground where Slim had his nefarious nest.

So, too, had a secret arrangement been effected with the old leader of the now defunct Texas Rangers, most of whom were in the service of the Government connected with the border patrol

and orders had been given the former gallant hero that if a certain message were received, no matter by what method, he was to gather a squad of his old fighters, and cross the border, sure of being warmly received by the loyal Mexican troops who would welcome his assistance in wiping out the sore spot that had been so long a blot on their country's honor.

Thus it would seem that everything possible had been done toward striking a telling blow. It only remained for Jack Ralston to start the ball rolling, when it must gain fresh impetus with every revolution.

Perk acted as though decidedly pleased when later on he discovered that they no longer followed the flashing beacon trail—Jack had gone as far as was judicious along that line and now headed straight into the mysterious south, toward the border of the neighboring republic where disorder still held sway, and disgruntled chiefs continued to plot against the rule of the recently elected president.

Every mile traversed now was bringing them closer to their goal, and Perk found more or less joy in picturing the thrilling climax, when they would give Slippery Slim the surprise of his life—if only no leak concerning their clever plan had come about.

The moon had risen, and was hanging there in the east, a silvery shield with one edge clipped off telling that the queen of the night was already well past her "full" stage and running for a fall.

All at once Perk had an electric shock.

He leaned convulsively forward and gripped his mate by the shoulder, at the same time pointing toward the southeast and shouting through the head phones:

"Look, oh look—see what's passing across the moon, Jack!"

Then just as suddenly did he release his clutch, to fall back in his seat, and exclaim most dramatically, with a touch of disgust in his voice:

"Shucks! It's slipped past, dang the luck!"

"But I got it all right, Perk," the pilot assured him.

"Then it *was* a ship, an' my lamps didn't fool me, partner?" Perk cried in renewed excitement.

"As sure as you're born, that's what it was, brother," Jack added.

"Headin' south, same as we're doin' right now, eh, Jack?"

"You said it, buddy—just what the crate was doing, Perk."

"What's the answer—could it a been *him,* on his way back home with a load o' machine guns,

like they say he carries every time he crosses the border, after takin' out a freshly printed batch o' his flimsy stuff to soak on the honest folks back home?"

"That's something we can only make a stab at," replied Jack. "Chances lean that way, I must say; but just the same it might have been some mail plane that's got blown off its regular course, and is beating it for the home port. Then again I understand the border patrol are handling a few ships in their line of intercepting flyers making a business of smuggling Chinese aliens across the line night-times."

"I'd give a heap to know the answer to that puzzle," continued Perk, who disliked enigmas, and all that sort of thing calculated to make a fellow lie awake nights, bothering his poor brains. He never had been fitted by Nature for the job of being a real detective.

"We'll never know," his pal told him, "unless it happens we run afoul of the other crate when our courses draw closer together and if it's Slim whose fingers grip that stick we'd rather be excused for having that happen—our job is to fetch him back *alive,* and not make him lose his life in a crash."

"Me, I ain't peticular just what *does* happen

to the slick guy," Perk wound up the little talk-fest by saying. "Only, when it comes to a real showdown either Slim or us got to go to the wall—dead or alive, the thing's goin' to be settled for keeps!"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SIERRA MADRE CHAIN

Another thing Perk noticed—this was the fact that Jack seemed to have changed his mind with regard to making haste for the ship was racing along at top-notch speed, as though engaged in a race with some unseen rival.

"Hey! what's the big idea, Jack?" he called out, when this thing had been going on for some time, and his burning curiosity could no longer be held in leash. "Why doin' the sprintin' act, I'm awonderin'?"

"Less chance for us to run foul of that other boat if we forge well ahead, don't you see, partner?" exclaimed the pilot, sententiously.

"Yeah! that's a fact," returned the enlightened Perk. "An' then mebbe it'd be jest as well for us to get there ahead o' the boss in the bargain."

"I'm aiming to do that," he was told. "It happens that we can't keep on in the boat till we strike close to his hideout—the racket would stir the whole bunch up like a hornet's nest you've kicked when going through the brush, with the mad critters swarming out to tackle you."

"I get you now, Big Boss—never did think o' that before. Then I kinder guess we'll have to hike some little way," and there was a vein of chagrin in the speaker's voice as he mentioned this fact, since walking and Perk never did seem to agree very well—like most flyers he had been spoiled for all manner of pedestrianism by his ability to cover such vast distances without moving his pedal extremities an iota.

"That's our sure enough program," Jack told him, doubtless thinking that the delayed knowledge might allow his pal to make up his mind about swallowing the bitter medicine without a single grimace.

It was not long after this little break when Jack again spoke:

"I've a good idea we're across the line now, partner," was the information he passed along.

"Sounds good to me, okay," commented Perk, with a tinge of solid satisfaction visible in his voice as though having a possible rough-house job to handle, the sooner he got busy the sooner it was likely to be over.

"And making more than an even hundred miles to the hour in the bargain, Perk."

"Some punkins about comin' in swell on the last lap, this crate sure is, I'd say, partner. Licketty split she humps along like a reg'lar witch. I guess now she'd make rings around

that ol' boat Slim's got hold o' though it answers his purpose seems like. But see here, Jack, you never did tell me jest how you got word to that same Colonel Morales down here in Mexico."

"I was given my instructions, and sent a telegram to him at Hermosilla, in care of Padre Lopez, giving him the order he was expecting—during the last hour we were in Los Angeles."

"Glory be! then the sojers must be in the saddle right now!" burst out Perk, with enthusiasm.

"If the arrangement went through without a miss that's like enough a fact," admitted Jack; "the way my plan's arranged everything must go off with the regularity of machine work, each separate part dovetailing, so as to work in full sympathy. If anything lags, and goes amiss, it's apt to throw the whole scheme out of gear, you understand."

"Yeah! I grab what you mean, partner," said the astounded Perk; "but I got to hand it to you when it comes to hatchin' up big things—it's jest wonderful how you manage. An' I sure do hope everything'll slide along like greased lightnin', once it gets started."

Jack had planned to drop down in some isolated spot where with the coming of dawn, with the aid of the strong glasses they could pick up

the rocky Sierra Madre range with its canyons and valleys, where, unless all his leads have been false clues, those whom they sought would have their secret den and stronghold.

Perk got to thinking these matters over, and of course he was bound to run across some things that still seemed a bit hazy in his mind. Accordingly he sought for information at headquarters.

"Say, now, d'ye know I'm jest beginnin' to get on to why you had the wings an' fuselage o' this here ship painted the color o' sand—took a pattern from the way they striped the steamers on the Atlantic durin' the big war, an' colored batteries on the battle front, so flyers couldn't pick 'em out to drop their bombs down on—camouflage, ain't that the right word, Jack?"

"Slow to get on to my little schemes, partner; but in the end you make a smart stab—yes, that was what I had in mind, for I knew we'd have to park the old bus somewhere in the open; and I didn't want any hostile eye to glimpse her from a soaring plane, or a mountain crag—for you see I reckoned Slim was too smart a lad not to have binoculars handy so as to watch for trouble."

More than ever was Perk impressed with an overwhelming admiration for the ability of his pal to lay plans capable of covering every possible necessity that could arise in carrying out the job they had tackled.

He asked no more questions, confident that everything was bound to move along smoothly, when the casting of the play was in such capable hands.

"Anyway," he told himself as he thus pondered, "we ain't seen anything more o' that moon ship, which makes it certain we've knocked her outen the runnin'. Wonder now if that was really an' truly ol' Slim, totin' a swell bunch o' machine guns, so's to bolster up the new revolution they say is bein' fostered an' nursed in this corner o' poor ol' Mexico. Queer what international jingles a feller c'n get mixed up in, when he runs in harness with Uncle Sam's revenue boys; but it's all pie to me, just the same, 'cause they allers did say my middle name was Scrap."

He was now starting to make use of the binoculars, which were fitted with lens capable of making them useful during the night-time, at least when there was a certain amount of moonlight. In a general way Perk could decide where to turn his attention, for it went without saying that the mountain chain lay toward the southeast for had he not studied the lay of the land upon the small but accurate map with which Jack had armed himself before leaving Washington to take up this hazardous adventure?

When he felt assured that he could make out the distant ridges he announced his pleasing dis-

covery to his mate and then at the other's request took over the controls so that Jack in turn might use the glasses and thus make assurance doubly safe.

"Bank, and head more into the east," Perk heard the other saying, after a steady look.

"Then it's the Sierra Madre okay, partner, I opine?" suggested the one at the stick, as he obeyed orders.

"No question about it," Jack assured him "but I knew it was time for us to sight the ridge. I've pored over the map of this section, and charted it all out in blocks, so I can tell just what the lay of the land is, and how long it's apt to take the colonel to get here with his galloping company. We're going to drop down presently, and find shelter where we can lie low until the hour comes for making our ten strike."

"How long might that be, boss?" asked Perk.

"It all depends on certain happenings. We can creep up close to the place, and watch how things move figuring out how to act when you get your first glimpse of a dust cloud away off toward where Hermosilla lies. I give the cavalry two days to reach here, if everything moves along smoothly."

"Two long days—an' say, we gotter eat all that time, don't we, partner?"

"We surely can't live on air, Perk; but I've

provided for that—even should we run out of grub you laid in I've a little deposit of dried meat, real pemmican in fact, that will keep us from famishing. Water we can secure somewhere among the mountain trails, since never a drop would we be apt to find on the open desert."

"Huh! I'm leavin' it all to you, Big Boss," Perk told him, again lost in wonder and near awe as he realized how Jack seemed to have thought of everything—what a mind the boy had for grasping details, and weaving them into the net with which they expected to enmesh the slippery one.

Now Jack slowed down their speed more or less, although of course it was not possible to soften the clamor accompanying their flight through space. But Perk noticed that, so far as he could tell, the night wind was coming from ahead, and this assured him it would not be apt to carry those telltale sounds toward the range lying in the east, and so warn the enemy of their coming.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CLOSE TO THE TIGER'S LAIR

"We're about due for a landing, Perk," finally announced the pilot, after he had used the glasses for a spell, and again took over the stick.

"Huh! some hike that's agoin' to be, I'd say, old hoss," grunted Perk; "but I guess it can't be helped—got to take the bitter with the sweet lots o' times—the way o' the world, seems like. Go to it then, boss; if anybody c'n make a safe landin' by moonlight it's jest you!"

His confidence was not misplaced, as Jack proved when he brought the ship down in as perfect a three-point drop as the best of aces could have carried out.

"She'll have to lie here till we need her again," he observed, on climbing out of his confined quarters, and stretching his cramped legs after the manner of air mail pilots in from a long and irksome run.

Perk stared around him — they were on the sandy desert without a doubt, and off toward the east could be seen the dim crests of the high and ragged peaks comprising the main ridges of the

Sierra Madres — old-time home of the fierce Yaqui Indians, whom the soldiers of Mexico had for so many years labored so hard and in vain to conquer; nor was it until the day the airplane came along that they were able to accomplish this much to be desired end.

But now other equally annoying thorns in the flesh had made a hideout of those same inaccessible mountains — defeated aspirants for the presidency of the Republic, always generals, took to gathering groups of malcontents and mercenary adventurers in these mountain depths, defying the troops sent to rout them out, and proving the latest source of trouble in the political problems of the authorities.

Jack soon completed his preparations for abandoning their ship. He looked it all over, to satisfy himself its camouflage would prevent it from being sighted by any air pilot chancing to pass overhead at a reasonable altitude then he gathered a few articles, the possession of which might turn out to be of value when it came to closing the mouth of the bag and finally announced himself as ready to make a move.

"Got all you wanted, Perk?" he inquired, incidentally, for he had reason to feel certain such was the case.

"Yeah! from the binoculars an' my rifle, down

to what's left o' the eats," the other assured him. "Guess we'll get along somehow or other."

"Oh! don't bother your head about the grub part, comrade; I'm carrying a small packet with me that holds enough to keep two men alive for a whole week—all we'll have to do is to run across some sort of spring, where we can get all the drinking water we'll need, while we wait for the wagon."

"Huh! in this case you're meanin' a *hearse,* 'cause mebbe we'll have to shoot him up afore he calls quits," and Perk grinned horribly at his own wit.

So they left the ship stranded there, sprawled out like a gigantic dragon-fly or a monstrous toad. If Fortune proved kind they might yet live to make good use of it again when the time came to fly back to God's country on the other side of the border where defeated candidates are in the habit of accepting the dictum of the voters, and retiring from the field of battle await the next call to arms, with ballots instead of bullets as their method of settling elections.

Side by side they set forth, like a pair of adventurers starting out in search of Fortune's smiles, and careless alike as to whether they met with success or not, so long as the excitement they craved came their way.

Perk managed to conceal the chagrin with

which he buckled down to his unwelcome task, walking always gave him a pain, mental rather than physical but on the whole he was a good scout, and could follow the beckoning finger of duty, even though he loathed the conditions attached to the performance of his role.

The sand was far from compact, and allowed them to sink in somewhat, so this made the going more difficult in contrast to that on the seashore which being beaten down by incoming waves is often as hard as concrete and a pleasure to walk over; whereas this of the desert was dry and sifted at the least puff of wind.

Perk having had some previous experience with deserts, felt no love for the uninviting waste places of the earth only such useless vegetation as sage, greasewood, cactus and yucca would grow between the sand dunes amidst the blistering fangs of the infernal heat and always vowed he disliked such arid regions with a violence too deep for mere words.

Yet he kept his own counsel and plodded away alongside his pal as if he had no personal feelings in the matter whatsoever. Far off in front of them they could see the line of peaks studded against the sky once or twice Perk felt certain he had caught a fluttering light aloft such as might spring from a passing plane but in every instance he finally decided it must be some shoot-

ing star, ducking behind the mountain range, leaving a trailing wake behind that but reflected its passing glory.

One hour, two, and then a third dragged along before Jack thought fit to call a halt. Never did poor weary footsore Perk, almost used up, listen to more welcome and delightful words than when Jack as he drew to a halt went on to say:

"Time to rest, partner, you know—I'd like to find a bunch of shady trees that would afford us a decent shelter from the blazing sun, should we be so unfortunate as to get adrift after leaving all landmarks behind."

"Oh! bless you for sayin' that, buddy," Perk was saying hoarsely, for his throat seemed as dry as tinder, the fine sand even affecting his vocal cords so that he would not have recognized his own voice. "By your leave I guess I'll lie down and get the kinks outen my legs. Wow! that must abeen fi' miles if she was one—my shoes are full o' sand, an' altogether I don't feel half the man I was on startin' out."

"There are some trees over yonder, you may notice, Perk; so after we've caught our second wind we'll take chances, and cut across to where they lie, perhaps when morning comes tripping along, we may climb up the face of the mountain and get a look-in at the printing establishment that's set itself up in opposition to the U. S.

Treasury Department, and the Federal Bank. Come on then, a little further where we can drop down, and rest our weary feet."

Shortly afterwards the pair had crept in among the sheltering trees, where Jack called a rest, although under the impression that they should get along further before break of day.

He talked matters over with his partner, speaking almost in whispers, since in this enemy country no one could take anything for granted and for all they knew hostile ears might chance to be close by, ready to listen in.

It was Perk himself who proposed to move along while the going was good.

"Seems like we might be a heap better off, old hoss, if on'y we located up thar on the side o' the mountain, where we could see without our bein' watched. I'm okay now, an' ready for b'ar."

That was the spirit Jack liked in his mate—a readiness to take hold and reach a decision. They moved along toward the base of the forbidding height, keeping a watchful eye on the eastern sky lest dawn come and surprise them in the open, where it would not be easy to find a hiding place during the entire day.

Fortune favored them, for they managed to get under cover before the first gray streaks appeared in the east. It was bound to be a strenuous task climbing that formidable mountain side

but Jack had prepared for even this part of the adventure.

From various sources he had learned how there were three separate means for subduing that grim pyramid of rocks and trees and tangled growth—in order to lessen the chances of discovery, with unpleasant consequences, Jack had decided to try and negotiate the most difficult of these mountain trails in the belief that it would offer a safer passage since evidently none of the seething revolutionists, or their allies, the bad men from across the border, would be likely to follow that canyon trail when others less difficult could be utilized.

Down there hidden by the bushes and spurs of outlying rock they employed their time in munching what must serve as their breakfast. Then quenching their thirst at a convenient pool they proceeded to climb the face of the steep elevation, making for the quaint hollow in the crater of a long dead volcano and which had once been a Yaqui fort.

CHAPTER XXIX

NEARING THE GOAL

They had now reached that most thrilling point in their bold venture, where they would have to "watch their steps" most carefully, lest an incautious act precipitate a calamity that must end all their hopes as well as snuff out their lives.

This breeding place for inflammatory embers of Mexican revolutionary disappointed political generals, and their immediate retainers, was about as safe for the two sky detectives as a cage of Bengal tigers would have been once let their presence be suspected, and the entire neighborhood would be scratched over as with a fine-tooth comb in the endeavor to discover their hiding place and should they be rounded up it needed no magician to prophesy what their fate must be.

Jack led the way, with Perk following at his heels, every sense on the alert. The native cougar of that historical group of mountains could hardly have crept along with greater care than

did the two human sleuth hounds of the law. Every advance was attempted only after a careful survey of the entire neighborhood—at the sound of some faint bird-call Jack would sink down and flatten himself upon the ground, his example being imitated by his shadow.

All this caused their progress to be exceedingly slow but time did not enter into their calculations so much as security—many hours must pass ere Jack could figure on the arrival of those upon whom everything depended and they might as well make use of the entire morning in climbing higher and higher toward their ultimate goal.

Once when they chanced to be resting their tired limbs, snug in a sheltered nook behind a mass of brushwood, Jack turned and looked back. The site was especially fine for looking out on the level stretch toward the spot where they had landed during the preceding night.

Perk, watching the actions of his comrade, could easily give a close guess as to what Jack had in mind. This opinion was made more convincing when he saw the other get out the useful binoculars, and apply them to his eyes.

Keenly he kept tabs on the other, and was finally thrilled to note the pleased nod Jack gave as if wholly satisfied.

Perk touched him on the arm, and as Jack turned made motions with his head, while his eyebrows went up, his expression without a single word being spoken signifying:

"How come?"

"Take a look for yourself, and tell me if you can get the first glimpse of our old crate" suggested Jack.

"Nothin' doin," whispered Perk, after a most diligent search; "an' if we can't get a whiff o' the boat, with these glasses, I kinder guess nobody ain't agoin' to locate it with their naked eyes."

"Which same lets us out from any danger in that quarter," came softly from Jack, whose face for the moment lost some of the strained look it had borne during the last few hours.

"Never saw a better sample o' camouflage when I was across the big pond alistenin' to the smash o' the rip-roarin' German guns," asserted Perk; and then "dried up" when he saw the other press a finger on his lips.

Higher they climbed, like monkeys, taking all manner of desperate chances when necessity arose but so cautious was Jack in leading the way that nothing amiss came about, every obstacle being successfully surmounted until shortly before the noon hour they found them-

selves in a position to spy upon the camp of their intended prey.

Jack was intensely interested in what he now visioned. The old crater, resembling an immense football bowl, as adopted by some Eastern colleges, looked as though it might have proven well nigh impregnable as a fortress where the fighting Yaquis were able to hold an army at bay—which feat history records as an actual fact.

Scattered about the depression were scores of rude dwellings, some built of rocks, while others more modern had walls composed of sun-baked bricks, known throughout all Mexico as *adobes*. Men and women, also children, could be seen moving about, preparing the noonday meal or partaking of their customary frijoles, hot tamales, or it might be maize cakes cooked in the hot ashes of fires, and with black coffee as a beverage.

The picture appealed to Perk, who delighted in novel scenes nor did it seem to lose any of its thrill from the fact that, as he very well knew, the men he was staring at so eagerly were most likely as tough a brand of desperadoes and villains as could be grouped together anywhere on earth—ready to fight, hold up trains, or commit all manner of pillage at the drop of a hat.

He marveled at the sagacity shown by Slip-

pery Slim in deciding to join forces with these firebrands of the back country, with the idea of thus securing the greatest safety for his own lawless operations.

All this while Jack had been keeping close watch, in hopes of being able to pick out the figure of the man he had been deputized to bring back to the States so he might be prosecuted for his crimes, and sent to Atlanta. There he would possibly end his days in seclusion, with a large portion of the Southwest breathing more freely since they need no longer fear the avalanche of counterfeit currency that had been demoralizing business for such a long spell.

After all it was Perk who made the discovery, he chancing to be carefully handling the binoculars at the time. He handed the glasses over to his mate, and told Jack just where to look, using as few words as possible, and keeping his voice very low.

Long and earnestly did Jack follow the movements of the remarkable character who had been described in his hearing so many times. What satisfaction it afforded him to know he was actually in sight of the big game and if only his plans carried through his hour of triumph was steadily drawing closer and closer. In imagination, as he continued to watch the moving figure,

he could vision the pleasure it would afford him when he could turn in his report to his Chief, and mark it as completed.

The afternoon drifted along, and night approached. Nothing could be done to hasten the crisis; they must wait patiently, and continue to shape their plans until the expected smoke signal told them Morales and his rough riders had reached the foot of the Sierra Madres ten miles further south and when assured by means of a counter signal that everything was working well, start to cover the last lap of their long ride, leave their mounts at a safe distance, and complete the journey on foot.

When darkness fell the picture was even more fascinating to Perk than before, with a number of fires lighting up the huge bowl, the sound of women chattering in Spanish, and children playing just as all youngsters might do while from time to time he could catch strains of music, telling that some amorous swain might be practicing on his guitar, as all who have a drop of Spanish blood in their veins invariably love to do when at leisure.

Perk doubtless made many a grimace while partaking of the light refreshment afforded by the tough pemmican Jack had produced, as their sole means for staying their empty stomachs for

when the evening breeze wafted some of the odors from the cooking fires down below it almost set him wild with a desire to partake of hot food. But he knew what he was up against, and sternly repressed the inclination to groan his protest.

It was one of the longest nights Perk ever knew. The mountain air, too, was cold, especially along toward the last few hours and since they were debarred from the joy of indulging in a campfire, Perk could only lie there and shiver. He never was so glad to see the pink sky in the east as on that occasion.

The day was but a repetition of their former afternoon with their sole recreation being the chance it gave them to watch Slippery Slim's movements whenever he appeared coming out of what seemed to be a cavern of some sort from which at several times when the racket from many tongues died down Perk could catch a strange rumbling sound, accompanied by what seemed to be a blow, and which he could easily believe must be the working of the printing press that had been carried all the way from the States in order to be able to produce those wonderfully clever notes that had deceived many shrewd bank tellers by their deceptive qualities.

Then at last Jack discovered, just as night had

begun to fall, three columns of smoke rising toward the heavens from far down the wild Sierra, telling how that Morales and his troop had arrived, and that the curtain was about to rise on the last scene of the international drama.

CHAPTER XXX

JACK GETS HIS MAN

Immediately on discovering the welcome signal, Jack dispatched Perk to put a match to the heap of brush they had arranged well out of sight from the depression where the skeleton revoluitonary army was slowly assembling its pitiful force of the dissatisfied generals who had been counted out in the last national election.

Perk understood what was expected of him, and managed to send up a single smoke signal, allowing it to have but a brief life and then hastening to smother the fire. As Morales was expected to be on the watch for just such a sign, he would lose little time in starting to carry out his part in the attack.

"In three hours they will be climbing the mountain by way of the old Yaqui trail we followed," Jack was telling his chum, when the other returned to his side, flushed with the success of his labors. "It is time for us to make a forward move, so that we may be ready to strike as soon as the camp quiets down and corral our

man, leaving it to Morales to carry the fort itself by storm."

This they set about doing without any further delay. Dodging from rock to rock, taking advantage of every outlying spur, as well as patches of hardy bushes, and other objects that were likely to conceal their movements from any watchful eyes but always creeping downward, they crawled along like two great lizards such as Perk could remember seeing when in the Philippines.

By the time they were ready to slip into the underground pressroom of the lawless printing company's plant, Jack figured the three hours had just about expired, and that it was now up to them to make the first hostile move that would precipitate the assault.

In thus deciding to make a start he was influenced by seeing an agreed upon signal from the same hiding place he and Perk had held for so many hours, and which told him the troopers had finally succeeded in climbing to the position assigned to them when plans for action were formed.

Flattening themselves out against the dark wall of a small cliff Jack and Perk glided along until they arrived at that aperture in the solid rock they knew to be the entrance to the wonderful underground retreat that had been described

by Simeon at the time when in his desperation he gave his confederates away and from which they had watched Slippery Slim come and go during those long hours of their espionage.

Slipping inside, they found themselves in a corridor that led into the body of the mountain with a gleam of light beckoning them to advance. In this fashion they kept moving, gliding from one point to another, until eventually they had a clear view of the little machine that was working so industriously in turning out the bogus money, hour after hour, as though the demand were without limit.

How Perk did stare, and hold his breath when realizing that they were upon the verge of accomplishing their great undertaking. Slippery Slim was doing no actual manual labor himself, but he kept close watch over the two men who ran the press, closely scrutinizing the printed bills as if to detect the slightest inaccuracy, and correct it without delay.

No wonder, Jack told himself, the product of his skill had startled the financial world by its genuine appearance, when such a master in his particular line took such personal pains to see that the work was carried out in its most minute details.

In whispers Jack informed his backer what his duty would be when the roar of guns and hoarse

shouts from without announced that the picked troopers had actually launched their long deferred assault. Jack had taken it upon himself to close in on the chief worker in that little coterie, and have the glory of capturing Slippery Slim unaided but meanwhile Perk might find plenty of action in holding up those two others who were second in importance only to the leading figure.

The tension had become almost unendurable when suddenly there broke out a frightful uproar — women were shrieking, children's high pitched voices told of intense alarm; men gave tongue, and above it all guns began to sound with deadly import, until the basin rocked with the dreadful clamor.

Jack waited no longer, but giving Perk a kick on the shins to tell him to get busy he rushed headlong toward Slippery Slim, holding his automatic ready for instant service, knowing as he did that such a desperate bad man as Slim was reckoned from all accounts, would not be apt to surrender so long as there remained the slightest chance for a getaway.

Nor was he mistaken in judging the character of the man who had so long defied the shrewdest detectives of the United States Secret Service for when Slim found his way to the open air barred by such a determined looking figure, he

snatched out his handy gat and made as if to open fire.

For once he was just a trifle too slow with his service gun, for Jack, clever lad that he was along the line of firing off-hand, managed to send a bullet through Slim's right shoulder that crippled him, so that his own weapon went rattling to the stone under his feet.

"Put 'em up!" Jack was saying, covering his man as he spoke and having no desire to commit suicide, Slippery Slim obeyed the call; and instantly afterwards suffering the painful ignominy of having his wrists encircled by a pair of nice new steel bracelets.

So far so good, with Jack, his own share of the capture an accomplished fact, able to turn in order to lend Perk a helping hand. It was not needed, for Perk had descended on those two muscular chaps like a thunderbolt, knocking one down with a terrific jolt under the chin and causing the other to look along the short barrel of his blued automatic, he having discarded the repeating rifle for the time being in favor of the easier handled pocket gun.

When the trio of discomfited rogues were all handcuffed, Jack and his reliable partner turned and faced the other way, so as to be ready for a rush, should some of those valorous generals decide to take advantage of the defensive security

of the rock cave, and bolt into its gaping mouth.

This being actually attempted they met with a demoralizing surprise when they found themselves the objects of a hot fire, that brought about a complete right-about face movement and presently forced their ignominous surrender to the gallant Colonel Morales and his fierce fighters, who had once before gone through an interesting campaign in that same old extinct volcano vent, with warlike redskins as their opponents.

The end was not long in coming, with many of the would-be revolutionists holding up their hands in complete surrender others escaping by losing themselves along the scraggly sides of the mountains and not a few either slain outright, or seriously wounded.

Jack and his chum had a chance to meet the doughty Colonel Morales, pride of the Mexican army, and be congratulated on their clever work of rounding up such a jack-o'-lantern, fly-by-night as Slim Garrabrant. Of course the two comrades were eager to start back to the other side of the border, since complications might come up over their legal warrant to arrest a criminal so badly wanted by the Washington authorities, but who had made his headquarters south of the international line.

Accordingly they handed over Slim's two lieutenants, who would have to answer to a charge

of being hand-in-glove with those plotting generals, and doubtless find themselves incarcerated in a Mexican dungeon for some years, a fate that made Perk shudder to contemplate.

While he stood guard over their prisoner, Jack sent Perk off at dawn, mounted on one of the cavalry horses, and accompanied by a soldier who would fetch back both animals, Perk's duty being to get the stranded ship off the ground, and drop down at a more convenient spot closer to the former mountain stronghold of the tiger-like Yaquis.

By nightfall they were hundreds of miles on their way over Arizona and New Mexico, Jack having decided to carry his prisoner, whose wound did not prove to be very serious, though painful enough—all the way to Washington, and present him to his superior, with his customary air of not realizing that he had done anything extraordinary.

That this thrilling feat was only a common occurrence in the lives of such intrepid man-hunters as serve the Government through the agency of the Secret Service and that from time to time Jack and Perk might with reason be expected to duplicate such adventurous feats can be set down as certain; indeed, the title of the next number in the Sky Detective Series, *"Eagles of the Sky; or With Jack Ralston Along the Air*

Lanes," a tale of the smugglers of the Florida Coast, will grip the reader from start to finish, and prove to be one of the most thrilling stories ever written for lovers of action and valor.

THE END